

Harry Potter and the Burden of Becoming

Prologue

The golden candlelight flickered off the stone walls, walls built before the founding of Hogwarts, before the campaigns of Charlemagne, before the birth of Christ. These walls endured the battles of Pharaoh, and of Caesar, and saw the creation of magic in the earliest of days. The rhythmic chant of the sixteen, cloaked in black, resonated against the walls, which somehow knew what was to come.

A thin, toothless, smile creased her aged face, worn by years of waiting, but now... now the time, at last, had arrived. With the sacrifice set, she closed her eyes and nodded, and the sixteen thrust forth their daggers. She could taste the blood, and her smile broadened; the age of Pravus and Morgana had returned... a new age reborn... the age of Voldemort and...

"NO!" she screamed, sensing, too late, his presence.

Harry woke with a start, his sheets soaked with sweat, a mixture of the night's heat and the new nightmare. Her screams still ringing in his ears, he adjusted his pillow, flopped back down, and... smiled. For the first night all summer, he woke to a dream that had nothing to do about Sirius Black.

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Chapter 1 - A New Beginning

The air was hot and humid as Harry lay on his back watching the clouds fly over Privet Drive. Droplets of sweat fell from his forehead making his hair wet. Under the shade of two large bushes he found himself again, as last year, outside the Dursley's open window hoping to hear some word of what was going on in the world, hoping to hear some sign that might give him a clue as to what Voldemort and his followers were up to.

He had received a few owls from Ron and Hermione, and one from Remus, each wishing him well, and reassuring him that all was quiet

in the Wizarding world. Yet, Harry knew that Voldemort's greatest strength was stealth, an ability to move unseen and undetected. All might be quiet, but that didn't mean that nothing was happening. So he listened intently for the smallest of clues, the least story that was out of the ordinary, and in those moments during advert breaks, his mind mulled over the prophecy of his fate... a fate only known by Harry and Professor Dumbledore. One day, Harry and Voldemort would meet, and only one of them would survive.

The newscaster led the stories of the night with a five-car pile-up outside Bristol. A petrol tanker had caught fire and three people had died. "A drop in the bucket," thought Harry, "if he has his way." In a few minutes, the news turned to the weather. "Hot, hot and hotter!" chirped the weatherman. With this, Harry's mind wandered to the parchment Ron had sent him earlier that afternoon. He pulled it out of his pocket and read it again. It was the most newsworthy note he'd received all summer.

Harry,

Sorry to hear you're so miserable. I thought for sure you were going to be able to stay with us this summer, but things have taken a bit of a turn. Dad was appointed to direct the Ministry's efforts in the capture of You-Know-Who and his followers. Dumbledore says that the appointment has put our whole family on the Death Eater's hit list. We've had to leave the Burrow to live in the one place I don't think you'd want to come back to, at least not yet. It's not the same here as it was last Christmas, that's for sure. Mum says as soon as we get things straightened up you should come to stay. Be strong, Harry! It should only take a few weeks.

Be careful!

Ron

Harry knew, of course, it was his godfather's house, Sirius Black. They'd spent Christmas there last year. It was the happiest Harry had ever seen Sirius; the pleasant daydream swirled in Harry's mind, but then, as it always did, his mind shifted to the scene it had played all summer long. He saw himself yelling at Hermione, demanding that

Sirius was in trouble. He saw himself lead his friends into danger. He saw Sirius coming to the rescue... Sirius battling Bellatrix... Sirius falling through the curtain. If Harry hadn't been so arrogant, his godfather would still be alive, and as much as everyone had tried to reassure him it wasn't, he knew it was his fault. He groaned just thinking about it again, the pain palpable in his heart. Had Sirius lived, Harry would be with him right now. The Ministry had cleared his name, and the Daily Prophet was declaring him a hero. Sirius Black, the closest thing Harry had to family, and he had led him to his death.

There was a loud pop from across the street and Harry jumped up, twisting just in time to miss the opened window. He'd grabbed his wand from his pocket, but it was just the carpenters finishing up some remodeling work on the old Wythe house. In front was a new SOLD sign. The house had only been up for sale about a week; Harry had never seen a house sell so quickly on Privet Drive.

"Put that down, boy!" his Uncle Vernon hissed, staring down at Harry from the open window. Sweat dripped down his Uncle's ruddy face as his eyes flashed up the street. "If you want to eat, get in the house... now!" Harry slid the wand back in his threadbare jeans and walked around to the front door.

Not much had changed since last year. Even though the Dursley's knew that Voldemort had risen again, and that he was out to kill Harry, no one would speak of it. In fact, nothing had really changed at all except for one thing. Dudley, Harry's oversized cousin, was now speaking with him, and not just jabs and insults. They were having real conversations. Harry was amazed Dudley could even string three good sentences together. At first, they were just questions: "What were those things that attacked us last year?" "Why couldn't I see them?" "Who's Voldemort?" "Why is he after you?" It seemed the more he learned about Harry and Harry's world, the harder it was to hate him. Dudley still had his gang, but when any of them tried to punch Harry in the ribs, or trip him while he was walking past, Dudley would simply say, "Lay off." And now, they simply did just that. Not only was Harry free to walk the village without fear of being pummeled, he was able to talk to other kids without having to worry that Dudley's thugs would come after them. The one thing Dudley wouldn't do was talk with Harry in front of his parents. So, after

another silent dinner of cabbage rolls and cottage cheese Harry climbed the stairs to his room.

It had been an exhausting day of nothingness, and instead of reading the Quid-Ex magazine Ron had sent him, he decided to go straight to bed. "Clear your mind," Harry thought. "Relax." He had resolved to practice Occlumency over the summer, and was actually getting quite good at it. He was able to sleep at night without dreaming of Voldemort, and his scar had stopped burning. Thoughts of Ron's letter left his head. The film of Sirius' death stopped playing in his mind; and soon he was asleep.

The sound of a loud squeal like fingernails on a chalkboard broke his slumber. At the sudden noise, he sat bolt upright in bed. The sun was streaming through his open window; it was morning already. There was a loud clanking and banging in the street outside. Harry rubbed his eyes, trying to adjust to the light; he grabbed his glasses from off his nightstand, and walked over to the window.

Outside, a moving truck had pulled up to the house across the street. A rather beaten up four door sedan was parked out on the curb as well. Movers were opening up the large truck and talking to a rather tall, dark haired man, whose eyes kept darting up and down the street. The morning was warm, but he wore a long-sleeved shirt, as he seemed to be pointing out what he wanted done. "So that's my new neighbor?" Harry thought. "I wonder what he's looking for?" A dark haired woman stepped out of the house. Unlike the man, she was wearing a T-shirt, but her eyes too were looking up and down the street. "Mrs. Neighbor?" Harry whispered. "What are you looking for?"

The woman cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled, "Gabriella!" Then, turning, she yelled something to the man in a language that Harry could not understand, and the man yelled back in the same tongue, clearly irritated. Was it Russian? Greek? Again the woman called, "Gabriella!"

"Yes, Mama!"

A tall slender girl appeared from behind the house. She had long black hair that was tied back in a ponytail. She too wore jeans and a

T-shirt, but somehow they seemed to suit her better than her mother. Was she about Harry's age? Her mother stepped down from the front door, grabbed her by the arm and took her over to her father. He began to yell, but what was being said Harry couldn't say. The daughter kept replying in English, but the parents... he couldn't tell. He leaned out his window slightly to see if he could pick out some word he might interpret when an owl carrying the morning's Daily Prophet hit him square in the face.

The owl squawked loudly, somehow entangling itself on Harry's glasses. "Get off me you bloody bird!" Harry felt himself slipping out the window. He reached up, grabbed the bird and tore it from his face, the bird screeching louder. Just in time, he caught himself from falling on the side of the window frame, and then looked down. Below in the street, the yelling had stopped. Everyone had turned to view the second story of number four Privet Drive. The movers looked perplexed, the mother and father stared blankly, and the daughter seemed to be laughing with her hand over her mouth. To Harry's horror, he realized he was hanging out his window in his boxers with no shirt and, of course, a severe case of bed head. He quickly pulled himself back up, flashed a half-hearted wave and smile, and shot back into his room.

What a glorious way to start the day. There he was, thinking perhaps that his new neighbors might be in league with the Dark Lord. Instead, a perfectly normal family moves in, and he almost breaks his neck falling out a second story window nearly saving Voldemort the trouble of killing Harry himself. He went to put a shirt on when another owl arrived, this time with a letter from Hermione. He sat down on his bed, trying to gather himself, and read.

Harry,

I hope this note finds you very well. It won't be long until we're all together again! I know it's only been a couple days since my last post, but I'll be traveling for about a week and I won't be able to write. Don't worry though, everything's fine! Just a short holiday. I'll write again as soon as I get back.

Love,

Hermione

Not a moment later a third owl flew in; this time it was a letter from Ron.

Harry,

Things have been getting pretty busy around here. So I won't be able to write for a few days. Don't worry though, it's nothing really important.

I'll write back as soon as I can.

Ron

The owls began to fight with each other, their feathers littering Harry's room. Hedwig hooted reproachfully from her cage in the corner. Harry ignored the commotion. Instead, he reread each letter trying to figure out what was going on. Obviously, he was being left out of something. Was he too much of a liability to start helping the Order? It was perfectly clear in Harry's mind that they were asking Ron and Hermione to help out. "Bit of a holiday!" Harry spat. They were probably being asked to travel somewhere, to get information, or maybe to try and capture one of the escaped Death Eaters. Bellatrix Lestrange? Did they expect Harry to just sit in his nice cozy room and wait for school term to begin? He tore the letters in his hands and scattered them with the feathers across the floor. "Get out of here you filthy birds, I've got nothing for you! I never want to see another owl again!" He chased them from his room and slammed his window shut. Hedwig gave a scolding hoot in her cage. "Sorry girl, I just... I just... sorry." He laid his forehead against the pane of the glass, and watched the movers below take furniture into the new neighbor's house. He stood there, watching nothing, until Aunt Petunia called him down to start breakfast.

Breakfast at the Dursley table was much the same as dinner the night before. Harry knew better than to say a word, and instead he let his mind turn over the early morning's events. What was the Order up to? What had they asked Ron and Hermione to do? Why did they both

tell him not to worry? Who was the family moving in next door? Was the girl part Veela?

“Uncle?” Harry had found the words falling from his mouth before he could stop them. “Do you know who’s moving in next door?”

“And what business is that of yours, boy!” The question had clearly brought something to the surface, reminding Harry of why he was never to speak at the table. Uncle Vernon’s face began to grow scarlet, and his eye began to twitch. He turned to Petunia. “Perfectly fine neighborhood! Perfectly fine! And now! Now! Ruined.” His last word squirted out like a deflating balloon.

“Now dear,” Aunt Petunia spoke in her nicest and most proper voice, “they may be perfectly fine.”

“Have you seen their car? How could the vermin even afford to live in this neighborhood?” Aunt Petunia simply shook her head, but Harry caught Dudley’s eyes and he clearly detected a look of disgust. “They probably came in to some money the wrong way, if you ask me. How else, eh? How else?”

After breakfast, Harry went outside for a walk to the park and met up with Dudley who was heading down the street toward Magnolia Avenue. “What was the ruckus at breakfast about?” he asked.

“The neighbors of course.” responded Dudley thickly.

“I know it was about the neighbors, what’s wrong with the neighbors?” Harry asked, trying to spell it out for his cousin.

“Well, they’re not from around here, are they? Dad says they’re from somewhere in the Middle East, he figures they’ve got to be terrorists or something. God, he’s bloody ignorant!” Harry just nodded and listened. “The woman was over working on their house the other day, and asked me if I wanted some cookies from the lunch basket she’d brought. They looked weird, but it was the best meal I’ve had in ages!” A look of rapture had spread over Dudley’s face.

“You don’t suppose they’re really dangerous?” Harry asked, wondering if maybe there was a connection, however remote, with Voldemort.

“Look, anyone that invites a stranger in and gives them food is number one in my book!” Dudley exclaimed. Harry couldn’t help but wonder what Mad-Eye Moody would say.

That evening during the news, Harry found himself under the bushes again; listening to yet another account of stories that meant nothing. When the adverts started, the film of Sirius’ death began to play again in his head, only to be cut short by the sweet sound of whistling... a tune Harry had heard playing on the radio over and over for the last few weeks. He sat up and peered through the bushes. Across the street was the girl, her hands clasped behind her back, she was simply whistling and looking at the flowers in the front of her garden. Harry looked and listened for a moment, and his heart seemed somehow lighter.

From inside the house he heard his aunt call out, “Dinner!” Quietly, he stood up and walked over to the front door. The whistling stopped. Harry could feel two eyes staring at the back of his neck. He thought to turn around, and then caught a glimpse of himself in the window; his clothes were covered in dirt and debris from the bushes, and his hair had something imbedded in it that resembled a bird’s nest. He was frozen for a moment. Quickly, he rushed through the front door, shutting it behind him. He looked back through the pane of glass, but the girl was gone.

He laid his forehead against the door, and sighed. Why should he care what he looked like? She was only a Muggle after all, but then another voice in his head whispered, “... a very pretty Muggle.”

That evening, preparing for sleep, he sat down on his bed and began to clear his mind. It was more difficult tonight; there were many voices bouncing about his head. Why didn’t anyone think Harry could help in the war? Why was everyone ignoring him? “They’ll come to regret it!” he thought.

He imagined Ron and Hermione dueling with a Death Eater, "If only Harry were here!" The Weasleys being attacked at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, "If only Harry were here!" The girl across the street, in a long white dressing gown, "If only..." There were loud shouts, and Harry's dream came to an abrupt halt. He knew the voices. In the darkness, Harry got up and went to his open window; the lights were on across the street. Through a downstairs window he could see the parents fighting again. The father was clearly agitated, pacing back and forth; the mother seemed dismissive, which only heated the argument further. The father kept pointing his finger at the ceiling, and Harry looked up.

His heart skipped a beat, and he quickly jumped back. At the window directly across from his, stood the girl, looking back at him. "Did she see? It's too dark," he thought. Slowly, he edged back toward the window. The girl still stood there, but she wasn't looking back at Harry, she was gazing up at the stars. Her dark black hair was free of its ponytail of the morning, and was draped over a white nightgown, which was blowing gently in the warm evening breeze. She seemed somehow sad. He stood, gazing across the street, for how long he didn't know. The yelling downstairs had stopped; she stepped back and drew her curtains shut. Harry lay down on his bed. He had utterly forgotten about Ron, or Hermione, or number twelve, Grimmauld Place, but it still took some time before he could clear his mind.

The next morning he found himself outside with a clean pair of jeans and the best T-shirt he could find that wasn't three sizes too big. He was looking for weeds in the sidewalk, even though he'd just pulled them all two days earlier, when he heard a door open and close from across the street. Casually, he straightened up and turned around. It was the mother. He exhaled. She was taking out some rubbish, when she caught Harry's eye. She tossed a plastic bag in the bin and looked back at him. Instantly, a light spread across her face and a huge smile appeared. Darting across Privet Drive, she walked straight toward Harry. She was a smaller woman with round brown eyes. Her smile revealed a golden tooth as she came close enough to hold Harry by the arm.

"Are you alright?" she asked with a very slight accent Harry had never heard before.

“Er, yeah.”

“You gave us quite the scare. I’ve never seen so many birds attack a person like that before.”

“Oh, yeah... I guess.”

“Have you had breakfast?”

“No,” he lied but not by too much. For breakfast, Aunt Petunia had served cold toast with cucumber jelly.

“Come here then.” Without ever letting go of Harry’s arm, this small woman with surprisingly great strength was marching him to her front door.

“No, really, I can’t,” he sputtered. He was telling himself how crazy this was to go into the house of a potential enemy. He began to pull back, but the woman held tight and thrust him through the door.

“Don’t be silly!” she said with a hint of mischief in her voice.

All about the entryway and into the living room were boxes and boxes waiting to be unpacked. The air was filled with a warm sweet aroma, and Harry felt his stomach give a slight jab as if to say, “Shut up stupid!”

“Gabriella!” the woman called.

A moment later, the girl descended the stairs in shorts and a halter top. “Yes, Mama?”

“Breakfast is ready, and we have company; that young man from across the street!” Harry had never been referred to as a man before, at least not in a polite way. He felt his stomach give another lurch.

“I met your brother the other day!” said the mother brightly. “Although,” she looked Harry up and down, “you don’t seem much alike.”

"He's my cousin," Harry responded dully still looking at Gabriella. She was standing only a few feet in front of him, and he could feel the tips of his ears redden slightly. Her eyes were as black as her hair, and her skin a dark copper brown. She had a dazzling smile, and seemed to blush slightly herself.

"We saw you yesterday morning," she said still smiling, "fighting off some attacking birds! Why did they come after you?"

"I don't know... never seen anything like it. That smells wonderful." He changed the conversation and looked toward the kitchen, but he could see her eye him up and down much like her mother as he looked away.

They ate breakfast while Harry shared what information he could about the village. Beyond pointing out what was where, Harry wasn't much help. With Dudley and the gang off his back, this was really the first year he'd ever had a chance to meet anyone. He did emphasize that Vernon was his uncle, and Petunia simply his aunt, and that they were most definitely not his parents. But, when they started to ask more about his Dursley family roots he quickly turned the conversation by asking questions himself. He thought, perhaps, too quickly, as Gabriella's mother seemed to have noted the second shift he'd made in the conversation.

Gabriella was born in Lebanon, a place called Tripoli. The language he heard her parents, Grigor and Soseh, speaking was Armenian. Her father had taught physics at the University of Balamand in Tripoli, and her mother was an artist. The opportunity for what they thought would be a better life came up when Grigor was offered a job at Pensley College outside of Little Whinging with their Astronomy Department.

"He's always had his head in the stars, and now he can get paid for it!" Soseh smiled. "Life in Lebanon is improving, but the country is still a very dangerous place. Life here on Privet Drive will be much safer; a chance for Gabriella to walk the streets without worry." Harry's mind flashed to his encounter with two Dementors less than one block away just last summer.

“Yeah!” he said with a half-hearted smile. Her mother’s English was nearly perfect; he could barely believe she was the same woman shouting at her husband the night before. They spoke for quite some time before Gabriella’s mother offered them some very strong coffee in tiny cups. It reminded Harry of some potion that Professor Snape would concoct, but he smiled and thanked her for it, drinking it down in one gulp, without too much of a grimace. Gabriella seemed to think it funny, and laughed.

“Perhaps some sugar?” she offered.

Asking for sugar would mean another cup however small, and Harry didn’t think sugar would help, but he couldn’t stop himself from handing her the cup and saying, “Sure.” Their hands touched and he could feel his ears reddening a bit more fully this time.

“Mama? Perhaps Harry could show me the neighborhood this morning?” she asked, as she put a small spoonful of sugar in the cup and then handed it to her mother.

“I think it’s a marvelous idea, darling.” Soseh filled the cup with coffee and handed it to Harry. “Here you go. It will put hair on your chest!” she grinned. Harry pictured himself topless hanging from his bedroom window. “Will you have time this morning, Harry?”

Time? Time was something Harry had too much of. His time was spent thinking about Sirius’ death, of Voldemort’s return, of his two best friends taking on adventures he could only wait to hear about. “Absolutely!” he smiled, sipping from the tiny cup. Within ten minutes, he and a very beautiful girl were walking down the street, talking about anything but the Wizarding world.

Chapter 2 - Hogwarts Forgotten

It was, in many ways, the happiest Harry had ever been. For over a week, he and Gabriella spent most of their days together, unfettered by fame, or infamy, Harry enjoyed being just a teenager. He was happy to leave discussions of Hogwarts and the Wizarding world aside, and loved just listening to Gabriella tell him of her home in Tripoli. Now that Dudley's gang was staying away, he was beginning to make a few other friends about town. Together, they went to places in Little Whinging and beyond that Harry had never seen before. Not only was he learning about the place where he grew up, he was learning a lot about himself. It was as if he was breathing clean air for the first time, and he liked it. After another perfect day, Harry and Gabriella were walking through the park as the sun began to set. "Perhaps tonight?" Harry thought.

"It's a beautiful July night," he whispered softly. The sun was breaking through slits in the clouds, the sky was turning red, and higher up a magnificent purple.

"Yes." she said, but not convincingly. She reached a hand to her eye and swept a tear away.

Harry was reminded of Cho Chang's constant tears. Not this! Not now! But then a voice seemed to echo in his head... Hermione's voice. "Harry, you're worse than Ron."

"No, I'm not," he breathed out loud.

"What?" asked Gabriella, looking up at him.

"H-How are you feeling? Is everything alright?" he spoke with a gentle voice.

"I was thinking of my home," she sighed. "On a good night, by the shores of the Mediterranean, you can watch the sun plunge into the sea flashing a million colours." Her eyes were fixed upon the setting sun in the west, but her mind was somewhere else.

Quietly, he asked, "You miss home, your friends?"

“Yes.” She looked at the ground, then back at him again and smiled. “But, you... you have been so wonderful to me. I think, ‘How can I not be happy with such a special friend.’” Harry’s heart sank; something about how she said the word ‘friend’.

The stars began to pop up across the sky, Mercury was visible low on the horizon. Harry’s mind was still spinning on the word friend, when she caught him off guard. “Does the school teach astronomy?” she asked.

“Yeah, Sinistra’s not bad. Professor Marchanks was pretty stiff about our O.W.L.S. being interrupted, but....” He stopped dead.

“Owls?”

Instantly, it seemed much warmer, he could feel the beads of sweat pop out on his forehead. “Ow! My Foot! I must have stepped on something!” He limped over and sat down next to a tree, taking his right trainer off and studying his foot intently. Gabriella was undeterred.

“Owls?”

Okay, Potter, think. Sure owls, uh, they see owls at night while taking astronomy. But school? He didn’t have a clue what Stonewall taught, or didn’t teach. “Uhm....”

“Hey little lady!” A voice Harry knew all too well broke the night air from across the park. Malcolm Smelt, one of Dudley’s pals. “It’s startin’ to get dark. What’s a babe like you doin’ out all alone in a dangerous park?” His words were sinister, threatening like only Malcolm could deliver them. But instead of turning, Gabriella stepped toward him.

“I think it is you who might find the park a bit too dangerous to be out all alone.” Her words were biting, but Malcolm simply laughed. Was she thinking Harry would defend her?

“A HOT babe at that!”

Harry got to his feet, filling with rage. He stepped forward in one shoe, Malcolm turned.

“Well, if it isn’t Brutus’s Incurable Criminal poster child! Why do they even let you out of that place, Harry?”

Harry stepped closer, reaching toward his back pocket.

“I mean, if you’re an incurable criminal, shouldn’t they keep you away from us innocent townsfolk?” Then, realizing that Harry was with Gabriella, Malcom sneered, “Oh! I see! You’re stalking young ladies in the park now, what a perve.”

Harry was formulating what he'd say to the Ministry as he grabbed for his wand. Then with a swish, a smack, a swoosh, and a thump, Malcolm was on the ground -- out cold. He couldn't believe his eyes; he didn't have time to think, before Gabriella put Malcolm down hard on his back, whipping his head into the turf. What had just happened?

“Come on!” She grabbed his arm much as her mum had done the week before, and started escorting Harry out of the park.

“Wait!” Harry ran back to get his trainer and returned hopping on one foot, nearly tripping over Smelt, trying to keep up with her and tie his laces at the same time.

“That... that was brilliant!” He was still somewhat shocked about the whole thing. “How did you...” He made a sort of karate-chop motion in the air.

“Mama, told you, didn't she?” Her voice was angry, “Lebanon is a very dangerous place.”

It wasn't until they rounded the corner on Privet Drive that her pace slowed, she stopped and took a deep breath. “You’re a criminal? Hah! He’s the criminal! You know him?”

“He's a friend of my cousin.”

“Asha!” she exclaimed, an accent slipping into her words. “Your cousin is a fool.”

Harry wasn't going to argue with her, not for Dudley. She sat down on the curb still steamed, but he could tell she was cooling down. He could also tell what was going to come next. “What was he talking about, a school for incurable criminals?”

His heart dropped through the street. He'd spent the most perfect week, with the most perfect girl, and tonight it was to end. He was forbidden to speak about the Wizarding world, and to cover up his time away to Hogwarts his aunt and uncle had declared he attended St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. Dudley had spread the rumor over the last few years, and most the neighbors on the street believed it. He was actually surprised it had taken this long for someone to mention it.

“It's just that... that...” he stammered, unable to put the words together. Gabriella's eyes opened wide, and she let out a small gasp of surprise as she held her hand to her mouth. Harry couldn't bear it; she thought he was dangerous. He stood up, and looking down at her, he whispered, “I understand.” He paused, fighting to say the words, “Goodbye,” and then he turned and walked away. He was numb; it was as if every feeling had emptied out of him. “Perfect for Occlumency,” he thought. He began to cross the street to the Dursley's, when he heard her running behind him. He didn't turn around. “She's running home to tell her mum and dad. Perfect.” But then a hand grabbed his shoulder.

“Wait.” He stood for a moment frozen, and then slowly turned to face her. She looked up at him. “What kind of criminal?” she breathed. Her eyes looked up disbelieving, but with a hint of twinkle. What was she really asking? He sensed she knew different, but he couldn't tell her the truth, and he hated to lie. He was searching for the right words, when he realized she was still holding his left arm, and before he could think of anything, she switched the subject herself.

“You don't go to Stonewall then?”

"No. I haven't gone to school in Little Whinging for five years now, this September will be the sixth." The twinkle in her eye sputtered, and her smile vanished.

"Not in Little Whinging, but where?" She turned them both to sit back on the curb, and as she released her grip on his elbow she slid her hand around his arm locking it in her own. They sat side-by-side.

"It's pretty far from here, you'll hear them call it St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys, but it's a lie!" he said defiantly.

"No? What's it called then?" Did she believe him? She waited patiently as Harry tried to find the words.

"I can't... I can't say. It's against... I just can't say."

"But this school for criminals teaches astronomy?" She seemed to move in closer, holding his arm tighter, her voice was incredulous, but her eyes sincere. He looked back into the black pools that had entranced him all week. He wanted to tell her everything, to take her with him right now and show her his life, his real life.

"Uh, yes. Yes, they do." He pointed to a bright red star directly over his head. "There, that's Mars."

"It's the brightest it's been for fifteen years," she whispered. Then pointing to another portion of the sky, "And there?"

"Jupiter. It's centered in the constellation Leo. If you track a line from that bright one right there and ..."

"I know, I know... and how about over here?" Her finger shot across Harry's face and pointed to the tips of the trees.

"Well, uh, it's kind of blocked, but if you could see there you'd..." he turned to look at her, and her pointing hand opened and softly touched his cheek. "Well, you'd see, uh, Venus."

"Fascinating," she breathed, "and does your school for criminals tell you about the ancient Greek Gods and Goddesses?" She was

standing up now, bringing Harry with her, a hand on his neck as the other slid to his waist.

“Venus is the, uh, the uhm....” and before he could finish they had kissed their first kiss. It was warm and wonderful. He brought his arms up from his sides and held her close; it felt so right, so perfect. He looked earnestly into her eyes. “I wish I could say more, but I can’t.”

She looked back up at him, the twinkle had returned to her eyes, and as she let go of his hand she said, “You’re very bright for an incurable criminal; perhaps some kind of evil mastermind?” She smiled and walked away.

“Tomorrow then?” Harry yelled across the street, his emotions still off balance.

She stopped and looked back. “More than just tomorrow I hope!” Then she disappeared through her front door.

Could it be? Was it possible? What had happened? His thoughts spun to what they’d do tomorrow. Harry’s heart was still pounding, as a car drove down Privet Drive and pulled in to the Darbinyan driveway across the street. Grigor stepped out of the car, shut the door, and looked back at Harry. The two hadn’t spoken much; Grigor seemed never to be home. Tonight, he looked intently at Harry for some time, until Harry waved his hand, and Grigor waved back, turned, and went into the house. Harry floated back up to his own front door; it felt as if he was soaring on his Firebolt. “A perfectly perfect evening.” He opened the door and stepped inside.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” The roar pressed Harry back up against the door.

“Well, we only... I just...” he couldn’t find a good word for snogging.

“Haven’t I told you about THOSE people, boy? Don’t you know what they are! I won’t have anyone in this household consorting with the enemy!” Uncle Vernon was livid.

“But Dudley....”

“Leave Dudley out of this!” His Uncle had turned a brighter scarlet, and a small patch of foam was forming in the corner of his mouth. This was it. Vernon was going to tell him he couldn’t see her again. Harry’s mind began to race. There was always the invisibility cloak, he’d never had a reason to use it until now, except to sneak snacks from Dudley’s room.

“If I EVER see you wave at that, that vermin again, you’ll be locked in your room for the rest of the summer! Now get up there, and don’t come down until morning!” and he turned and stormed away.

Harry was stunned; wave? Uncle Vernon must have only just looked out the window, probably when he heard the car door slam shut. He saw Harry waving at the terrorist across the street. Well, he’d certainly make a note not to wave at anyone from across the street from now on.

He climbed the stairs and got ready for bed. Turning out the light he took off his glasses and slipped between the sheets. He’d forgotten Occlumency, his mind was frozen on two black eyes, smooth copper brown skin and long black hair. “Well,” he thought smiling to himself, “perhaps I am a bit of a criminal. I have faced a full wizard’s trial.” He laid his head down. “I’ve had loads of detentions.” He rubbed the back of his hand. “I’ve almost been kicked out of school!” He was thinking of all the truths he could tell Gabriella, and then stopped. He slipped out of bed, grabbing his glasses and walked to the window.

Her curtains were open, and she was sitting at her bed writing something. A journal, or perhaps a diary, and she appeared to be having trouble with her pen. A candle flickering on a stand near by was the only light in the room. Harry had never seen the Dursley’s light as much as a match; even their fireplace had been boarded up and replaced by a mechanical contraption. The glowing yellow light bouncing off the walls in her room brought his thoughts to the Gryffindor common room. Was she writing about him? Was she recording how she had met a criminal? Or was she writing how she had to save him in the park? Still, she was brilliant tonight. “Definitely a Gryffindor,” he smiled to himself, and he slid back into bed.

The next morning, Harry found it hard to slip away; it was Saturday, and Uncle Vernon was not going to work today. Instead, he seemed to be intent on squinting out of the front peephole to see what was happening across the street. Harry went back to his room after another disappointing breakfast and stood at the window. There she was, waving at him to come over. He shook his head, pointed to his watch and flashed twelve fingers. She signaled an "Okay," and went back inside.

The year before, the Order had sent a fake letter inviting the Dursley's to the All-England Best-Kept Suburban Lawn Competition, and while they went to the fictional event, the Order came to take Harry out of the house. Aunt Petunia was thoroughly distraught that they not only hadn't won, but that there was no such organization. Undaunted, she had organized one on her own -- Little Whinging's Best-Kept Suburban Lawn Competition. Albeit not as grand as the original concept, today they were to have their third meeting at noon down at the town hall. The morning was already turning hot, and she had put on an overly elaborate dress for the occasion.

"Come on dears! Today we select the judges." She seemed beside herself with anticipation, waving at Uncle Vernon and Dudley to hurry. Vernon had been keen on the idea last year when he thought he might be a winner, but going to organizational meetings was not his idea of a grand way to spend a day off. He took another look out the peephole; Dudley looked at Harry and simply shook his head. Harry actually felt sorry for him; would he have been somehow normal with a different set of parents? How could they possibly be blood relatives? Vernon turned to Harry.

"Stay out of trouble boy, and no funny business."

"Yes, sir." said Harry shortly. His Uncle spoke these words every time he left the house, and the response was always the same.

By ten till noon, the Dursley Family had left the house, and immediately Harry raced across the street. Gabriella opened the door before he had a chance to knock. "Can I help you?" she smiled.

"Only if breakfast is ready," Harry grinned, sliding close by her as he entered the Darbinyan home.

Her mother and father were at the table reading the newspaper. The now familiar smell of coffee filled the air, and Harry couldn't help but notice another place was set with a plate full of food. Without being asked he took his seat as Gabriella sat at his side finishing some flat bread. Her father turned the page of the newspaper.

"Well, I hope not too many died."

Harry turned his head; he hadn't listened to the news, or read any paper for over a week.

"Died?" he asked.

"Terrible explosion in London," he sighed, "so far, three found dead. They expect to find more once they clear the rubble."

"Where in London?" There was a slight tremor in his voice.

"I know it sounds awful son, but things like this happen. Don't worry though; it was some vacant department store; probably old pipes." Grigor turned to the next headline.

Harry's appetite suddenly evaporated. He poked at the food on his plate for a few minutes. He could see Soseh looking at him with some concern, but he didn't look up.

"A sensitive heart," she praised warmly. "There are not too many of those left in this world."

But Harry's mind had snapped to his visit last year to an empty department store; no one ever paid any attention to it, at least not Muggles. To them it was just an old dilapidated building. But, in fact, hidden within was the most advanced medical center for wizards in all of Europe -- St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Would Voldemort be so cruel as to destroy the sick and injured in a hospital? He had to find out.

“Excuse me.” He slid his chair back. “I have to go for a minute.”

Gabriella looked at him. “Go where?”

“Just for a minute, I’ve got to, er... finish a letter before the post comes.”

“Okay,” she said brightly, “I’ll come too.” And before Harry could say no, they were both out the door walking across the street.

“Really, it’ll only take a minute. I uh, uh...”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve never seen your house.” They opened the front door and Gabriella let out a small gasp of wonder. “Oh my, it’s very nice; very well... well, organized.” Harry didn’t have the heart to tell her that his aunt had not had time to straighten up this morning.

“If you want, you can watch some television; I’ll only be a minute.”

“No,” she smiled, touching the small of his back. “I want to see your room.” He was torn, and his head seemed a bit cloudy, he couldn’t really think straight.

“Well, alright.” And the two walked upstairs. He hadn’t planned on a visit. The room was okay, but dirty clothes were piled in a corner next to his trunk, his bed was unmade, and torn strips of paper were still scattered on the floor.

“Oh! It’s beautiful!” She walked over to Hedwig’s cage. “You never told me you had a pet! What’s its name?”

“Hedwig. I’ve had her for about six years.” He reached to hand Hedwig a treat, but she was busy letting Gabriella stroke her feathers through the cage. “Here.” He opened the cage to let Hedwig out. “I guess she’s been about the best friend I’ve had around here,” he paused, and turned to look at Gabriella, “until now.” And as if it was the most natural thing in the world he kissed her again.

“Six years?” she asked. And he could see her thinking about something. He walked over to his dresser and pulled out some parchment and a quill.

“This should only take a minute.”

“An old fashioned ink bottle; how wonderful! What made you decide to write like that?” Harry realized that it all must seem a bit strange, but he had to get the letter out... and he wasn’t sure why he’d let her in his room... but he wasn’t saying anything... so it must be okay... and he wasn’t telling her he was a wizard... so it must be okay... and beside she was so beautiful.

“School,” he said simply.

“Ah, yes,” she smiled, “criminals writing with quills and parchment; back to the basics, eh?”

He’d finished off his note. Just a quick, “What’s happened in London? - Harry.” He rolled the parchment, and tied it to Hedwig’s leg. Who was he to send it to if Ron and Hermione were busy? “Hedwig, get this to Fred and George; they’ll tell me what’s going on.” He kissed her on the head, and she flew out the window, soaring into the warm summer sky.

Gabriella stood somewhat stunned. “A carrier owl?”

“Well, I’ve had her a long time, and she’s pretty smart.”

“I see.” She stared after Hedwig long after she’d disappeared from sight. Then, looking back inside, “It’s terribly hot today,” she wiped her brow. “Let’s go for a swim!”

“Swim?” He’d never been swimming in Little Whinging. His last time was at the lake, but then he could breathe underwater. “Swim?”

“You can swim, can’t you? Get your suit and let’s go to the pool.” The pool in Little Whinging would be packed on a day like today. Dudley and his gang had been spending a lot of time there this summer, and with Dudley gone he was sure there might be trouble.

“How about a movie? It’ll be cool inside, besides, the pool’s a long walk, we’ll fry before we ever get there.”

“You’re sweet. I’ll go across to change and meet you downstairs in ten minutes, we’ll take Papa’s car, he never uses it.”

“But I’m not... you’re not old enough,” challenged Harry.

“That’s never stopped me before,” she said with a sly smile. “Besides, I have...” she stopped herself and just waived her hand in the air, signaling it didn’t matter, and then turned to leave. For a moment, she paused at the door, looking at something on the floor, and then went on downstairs. “Ten minutes!” she called back, and was quickly out across the street.

Harry walked to the door to see what she was looking at; it was one of his books, emblazoned with a large H. One of the books Hermione had been harping on him to read since their first year together,

Hogwarts, A History.

Chapter 3 - Shattered Glass

They were in the Darbinyan family car headed to the east side of town. Before he left his room, Harry had decided to straighten up a bit; if Gabriella ever had the chance to come back again, he didn't want anything strange lying around. Although he'd gone so far as to move his bed and retrieve all the magical items trapped down against the wall, there was still a bit left undone, but he was already ten minutes late, and he couldn't stand to wait any longer. It was terribly hot outside, and the back of Harry's legs stuck to the car's vinyl covered seats.

"How long have you been driving?" he asked. She was wearing a long T-shirt over a brightly colored two-piece swimsuit. For some reason, Harry couldn't help but think that swimming might not be such a bad idea after all.

"Well, I used to drive a small pickup in Tripoli, so I guess for about four years now."

"Four years!"

"What? You drive don't you?"

"Well, no, not really." He remembered being nearly beaten to death by the Whomping Willow in a Ford Anglia, but that didn't really qualify as driving. "The Dursleys really haven't given me the chance to learn. I don't think they'd even try when I'm old enough for my provisional."

"They're horribly cruel if you ask me."

Hearing her words, Harry smiled and nodded in agreement. It was wonderful having someone in Little Whinging on his side for a change. As they drove toward the pool, Harry told her Vernon's edict that he was prohibited from waving across the street. Gabriella shook her head and sighed.

"Papa had hoped to leave that sort of thing behind, but he also gets rude comments at work. He tries to hide it, but I can see he comes home angry at times." They pulled in to the crowded car park. "Well, if

we get the chance, I think I can teach you how to drive,” she said with twinkling eyes.

When they got to the pool entrance, there was a long line of people waiting to get in, and standing in the sun, Harry began to sweat through his T-shirt. Wiping his brow in the heat, he looked at Gabriella, and rolled his eyes. “I love swimming, don’t you?”

“It won’t be much longer,” she said with a smile, and handed him a bottle of water from her bag. When they got to the front, he paid for them both, and they started to go in.

“Hold it!” An older man, somewhat taller than Harry, was scowling in their direction. He passed Harry, and walked straight to Gabriella. “Let’s see what you’ve got in there.” He was pointing to the sports bag she’d brought with her; Harry carried a similar one.

“Hey, you didn’t ask to look in mine! What’s up?”

Gabriella held up her hand saying, “It’s all right Harry,” and then she opened her bag for inspection.

But Harry was getting hotter. “We’ve been in line behind fifty people, and you haven’t searched anyone’s bag!”

Gabriella looked somewhat upset that he was taking her side. But why? This was outrageous! Just because of her skin color?

“Son, it’s my job to keep the two hundred people in here safe, and that includes you AND your friend here.” He closed her bag, and said, “Thank you, Miss.”

The pool was packed, and they weaved their way to a small opening on the concrete deck just five feet from the water’s edge and set down their towels.

“That was ridiculous! As if you...”

“As if me,” she interrupted. “Papa’s timing has never been that great; of all the times to move to England,” she said with a sigh. “I don’t

need you to fight my battles for me!" For a flash, there was an eerie anger that raged in her eyes, but then softened and she took his hand. "Really, okay?"

He wanted to carry the conversation further, but one look into her saddened eyes, and he was lost. "Okay," he agreed, but he still couldn't help think it was unfair. He knew what she felt like, and it was horrible, everyone presuming they knew Harry Potter, before they ever so much as shook his hand. One glance at his forehead was all anyone ever cared to know, and one glance at Gabriella's face instantly made her a suspect.

After about an hour, Harry's mind had left the entrance and was focused on the here and now. He found that swimming wasn't so bad after all; he was there with the most beautiful girl at the pool, and they spent most the time simply hopping in the water to cool down only to lay back out in the sun and talk.

"Hey! Harry! Gabriella!" He looked over to see Emma and Duncan just getting to the pool. They had met the two of them earlier in the week at an ice cream shop and had seemed to hit it off pretty well. Duncan lived just two streets down from Privet Drive, and knew all too well about Dudley and his cronies. They carved out a space and the two joined Harry and Gabriella.

Duncan took off his shirt. "Bloody hot, isn't it?" he asked with a long exhale. About Harry's height but stockier, he was a year older. His hair was long and blonde, and he had freckles that ran down his back reminding Harry a bit of Ron. Around the bicep of his large right arm was a tattoo of thorns that matched, somewhat, the earring on his left ear. A bit older, Emma was a runner. She had just competed in the All England Track Championship placing third individually in the 400 metres. Her hair was a short, light brown, revealing piercing green eyes, and she wore a broad smile. Around her ankle was the same tattoo of thorns.

"Duncan's been working at the shop all morning," Emma bemoaned, "so he's a grump. How are you two doing?"

Gabriella and Emma began to chat, and Duncan jumped into the water to cool off. As Harry looked around the pool, for the first time in his life he felt normal; he was just a normal kid at a normal pool on a normal summer's day. Even at Hogwarts he couldn't just sit and be one of the crowd, but now, he sat without a care in the world.

"Anybody for a drink?" he asked. The two girls nodded, engaged in conversation, Emma letting out a small laugh and turning to look at Harry as he began to walk away. She had a peculiar curiosity in her eyes, as Harry smiled back.

He'd picked up four drinks, thinking Duncan would want one too, and was weaving his way back through the crowd.

"Hey, perve, thirsty today?" It was Malcolm Smelt, flanked by another one of Dudley's pals. He was wearing dark glasses, but they didn't cover completely the bruise under his right eye. He too had just stopped at the snack shop, and was holding an ice cream cone in his hand -- chocolate mint. He took a long lick and asked, "So, peakin' up any more dresses, Harry?" Harry's blood began to boil. "I mean, I guess if you're gonna look, this is the place to do it... how pathetic," he sneered.

For the first time all summer, Harry's scar began to burn. "Now that gal you were checkin' out last night, she was like hot chocolate. I think I'll get me a little of that action, if you know what I..." Malcolm looked down to see the ice cream in his hand begin to melt. Well, it looked like that at first; it was more like deflating, oozing down the side of the cone and around his hand. But it wasn't dripping to the ground; instead, it started to spread like some slowly creeping vine. First it was around his wrist. "What the..." And then it started to move up his forearm. "Get it off!" he yelled. No one seemed to understand, but Harry, what the big deal was. He tried scraping it off with his other hand, but the green ooze simply grabbed the other hand and held it tight. He ran screaming into the changing room. Harry smiled, though he knew he shouldn't, but somehow he enjoyed that very much. He turned, hands full of drinks, right into Emma.

"Was that who I think it was?" she asked.

“Malcolm Smelt,” Harry said coolly, trying to manage the four cups he was holding. How long had she been there?

“Gabriella told me about him. What a creep. Here,” she said grabbing two of the cups, “I thought you might need a hand.” Together, they walked back to the pool’s edge. “What happened? Why did he run from you like that?”

“I guess he doesn’t like to get his hands dirty,” he said simply. “Hey, Duncan, want a drink?” Duncan waved, swam over and pulled himself out of the pool.

“Thanks, mate!” He took a sip and grimaced. “They’re warm! Harry you’d better go get your money back.” Harry took a sip. They were more than warm; they were quite hot in fact.

“Uh, yeah,” he said nervously, “I’ll be right back.” He hopped up to get fresh drinks.

When he returned he could tell by their faces something was afoot. Gabriella looked up at him patting the towel by her side. “Sit,” she said smiling. He handed out the fresh drinks again and waited. “Emma here tells me there’s a band playing tonight in the square... an open air concert.”

“Yes!” Emma chimed in. “The Steel Chords; I just bought their last CD and they’re fantastic! What’s more it’s free! If we get there early, I’m sure we can find a good place to sit. Duncan and I were planning on doing dinner first, if you two want to come, say about seven?”

Harry’s heart seemed to jump; he was being asked by friends to go to a concert with his girl. It seemed that that there could be life on Privet Drive after all. “Well, I’ll have to ask,” Harry lied. He knew if he asked the answer would be no, but maybe if he talked Dudley into staying out late. “As long as I’m back before Dudley,” Harry thought.

Gabriella also knew the Dursleys well enough to understand that, if he asked his Uncle Vernon, the answer would be no. She looked at him with knowing eyes, but didn’t mention it; instead she held her hand to his face.

"Hand me the lotion Harry; your neck is getting red." He passed her the bottle, and she put it on his neck and shoulders. She then rounded on him and started putting it on his nose and cheeks giving out a little laugh. "You look like you've been eating whipped cream!" Gently, she spread the lotion on his face and up to his forehead, and then paused. She'd seen his scar a million times, and hadn't said a word; she traced its outline with her thumb. "You were rubbing it a minute ago, does it hurt?" She looked from the scar to his eyes, and he felt she could see through to his soul.

"Does it hurt?" he pondered. What should he say? "Naw. Its just this connection thing I have with a dark wizard who plans on destroying all humanity, and may just have the power to do it." Instead, he simply reached up and grabbed her hand. "With you here nothing hurts." He pulled her close, and they kissed.

"Well, I think we're on then," said Duncan with a wide smile. "Seven sharp at Belton's; best fish and chips in all England!"

They swam and chatted for a couple hours more, before deciding to call it a day. Heading home, the car was filled with the scent of suntan lotion; the sun had turned Harry a little too red.

"I think that's going to sting tomorrow," Gabriella said. They turned the corner past the town square where they would be returning later that night. "Well, we do have all summer to get you tanned up. We'll just have to get your clothes off more often!" she joked. And before Harry could come up with anything remotely witty to say, she called, "Ah! Here we go." She pulled off into the large car park of a church. It was empty, except for the church van parked in the corner.

"What are we doing here?" he asked. Gabriella stepped out and walked around the car opening Harry's door.

"Scoot over!" She nudged Harry to the driver's seat, and he obliged. "Well, let's see, you know what the steering wheel does?"

"But you said you'd ask your f-father first," stammered Harry. "I don't think I can..."

"Don't be silly," she said. And with those words, he knew he was about to learn how to drive whether he wanted to or not.

It was getting late by the time he started to get the hang of it. "We'd better go," he said, "we don't have much time to get ready."

"Do you want to take it home?" she asked.

"Maybe next time," he said, and then stepped out and around the car with a grin.

As they drove down Privet Drive, Harry noticed the Dursleys were home. "Stop here," he said quickly. "I'll walk the rest of the way." He kissed her goodbye and said, "Give me thirty minutes." He watched her park in the drive and enter her house before he walked to number four. Inside he found the Dursleys had just finished eating.

"If you plan on being late for dinner, boy, don't expect to eat!" his Uncle snapped.

"Right," Harry said flatly; normally he'd be serving dinner, not eating it. He narrowed his eyes on his cousin and nodded his head for him to go upstairs. "I'll just be in my room."

A few moments later Dudley slipped in.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I need to go out tonight, and I might be late. I was wondering if..."

"Gabiella?" Dudley asked. Surprised, Harry nodded. "That's reason enough; no problem. I need to get out of this place myself. Only five people were there this afternoon, and it took them three hours to pick two people to be judges: Mum, of course, and a Mrs. Finley; God it was awful." He turned to go, and then remembered. "Frank stopped by a while ago; he said Malcolm went berserk at the pool. Thought he was bein' eaten by his own ice cream. Finally, washed his hands and the problem went away." He looked at Harry. "It sounds almost... magical." Harry looked away, offering only a sigh. "Well, he's been a

bit of an idiot lately anyway. I'll take off in about ten, okay?" Harry nodded, and Dudley walked through the door, slamming it shut and shouting, "...and the next time you want to borrow my stuff, ask!"

Gabriella and Harry made it to Belton's with five minutes to spare. Duncan and Emma were already there. They'd taken a booth near the window and were waving at them to come over. No sooner had they sat down than the waitress was delivering the food. Harry looked up, confused.

"On me, Harry," Duncan said, "two for one coupon tonight." He held up a small coupon book, waving it in his hands.

"Well, I'll get desert then."

"I bet you will!" said Duncan with a wink, and passed over some napkins.

Emma was looking at a flyer. "Well, there's a warm-up band that starts at nine, the Chords start at ten. We've got loads of time, how 'bout we walk from here?" Everyone nodded as they ate.

"Hey, Harry, how 'bout a shot?" Duncan was holding up a little flask; Emma glared at him.

"Duncan, put that away!" she said, but Duncan poured some into Harry's cup anyway.

"Yeah, yeah, alright; just a little something to light the fires, eh, Harry? Cheers!" He held up his cup to Harry's. Harry hesitated. He wasn't going to ruin an evening by being a stick in the mud. He lifted his cup.

"Cheers!" said Harry in an uneasy tone, and he took a drink. His eyes winced and he felt like spitting up, but he swallowed. He'd seen the older students drink at Hogwarts, and once he tried to nick a glass, but Hermione caught him and made him put it back.

"See!" Duncan crowed. "It's lighting the fires already!"

Gabriella set her hand on Harry's leg and gave it a slight slap. He glanced over at her with an apologetic look, and shrugged his shoulders.

The walk to the square was only a few minutes, and with the concert tonight a lot of the shops were still open. It wasn't much, but Harry was starting to feel the drink getting into his head. Since he'd never had fire-whiskey before, he wasn't quite sure what to expect; he held on to Gabriella for a little more support. They looked into the window of a small gift shop; stuffed animals lined the windows. Emma cooed, and Duncan took her inside first.

"They're rather cute, you know," said Gabriella looking through the window.

"Who, the two of them, or the stuffed animals?"

She laughed. "No, those two bears there holding hands; one has glasses just like yours." Thinking about his lack of Muggle money, Harry frowned.

"Listen," he said, "I barely have two pounds to rub together. I wish I could but I... I ..."

She held her hands up to his mouth, and said, "Hush," in a low whisper. Then, lowering her hand, she kissed his lips. "I don't want what's in your wallet; I want what's right here." And she held her hand on Harry's chest. "Come on, let's go in and have a look anyway," she said brightly. Harry's head was spinning a bit, but he wasn't quite sure if it was the fire-whiskey or her kiss. She took him by the hand into the shop.

Emma was looking at some necklaces on the side of the wall, and Gabriella joined her. Harry walked over to Duncan, who handed Harry his flask again.

"Little sip?" he asked. Harry took the flask, and glancing back at the girls took a small sip. Now he knew why they called it fire-whiskey. His mouth and throat burned a bit, as Duncan patted him on the back. "Look mate, I know the Dursleys are keeping you down. I was

wonderin' if maybe you'd like to help out at the shop? I know the owner there real well, good friend of my dad's, and I'm sure I could get you in. Pay's not too bad for part time work. It'd give you a few pounds to put on Gabriella. What do you say?"

Harry didn't think twice. "Sure, when do I start?"

"I'll talk to him tomorrow!"

"Hey, Duncan, come here!" called Emma. The girls had made it to the earrings and Emma was holding up something that looked like a thistle with a red berry in the middle. "Try this on." She handed it to him, and he modeled. "Oh, it's perfect," she said with a smile, and then quietly hummed a short tune, interjecting a few words as she looked in the mirror. All Harry could make out were the words: oak, ash, and thorn. Emma turned back to Duncan and grinned. "It'll be your birthday present!"

"When's your birthday?" asked Harry.

Duncan took off the earring and handed it to Emma. "Week after next, on the 24th."

Harry smiled a bit too broadly. "That makes us both Leos!" He slapped Duncan on the back enthusiastically.

Gabriella looked at him. "Why? When's your birthday?"

"The 31st. At least, that's what they tell me." He was looking at the mirror holding up his fringe, and grinning at his scar.

"I wonder...?" Gabriella went to a small display. "Harry, what do you think?" She held out an earring in front of his face. "Do you think it's a bit much?" In her hand was a silver lightning-bolt, and she held it to his ear. "The other one could be mine." She held it to her own ear.

"I-I don't think..."

"Ohhhhh, I LOVE it!" Emma squealed. "Harry, it looks fantastic."

“Quite the statement mate, with that scar on your head,” Duncan chimed in.

“Well?” Gabriella asked, looking into his eyes. “It can be my birthday gift to you.”

“Bloody hell; why not.” And Harry climbed into the chair to have his ear pierced. The salesgirl came over.

“Oh, an excellent choice, give me just a moment.” As she went to get her tools, Harry stared in the large mirror directly in front of him. Well, now he and Ron’s brother Bill would have something in common. Everyone thought Bill was cool; he started to grin again.

The salesgirl stepped back over to the chair. “This won’t hurt a bit. It looks like your first time, at least on the ears. Is it?” Harry nodded, flushing a bit scarlet. “Well, you may want to pull away, but try to stay as still as possible, it won’t take but a second.” She held what looked like a staple gun to Harry’s ear and....

There was a tremendous CRASH, as the mirror Harry was staring into shattered into a million pieces. Emma, and another woman in the store, screamed. Duncan, who was taking a swig at the time, also gave a small yelp, spilling what was left down the front of his shirt. Only Gabriella seemed un-swayed by what had happened.

“Did it hurt?” she asked, sincerely concerned.

“Not really,” Harry replied, a lightning-bolt now dangling from his ear. “I guess I must have kicked the mirror, or something,” he said sheepishly.

“Or something.” Her eyes were twinkling again, and the twinkle remained as they held hands making their way to the square.

The concert was loud, and he’d had a smashing good time; he danced and even sang a few of the songs he’d heard played on the radio. He and Gabriella wore smiles the whole night. At midnight, the band went home, but it wasn’t until an hour later that the four made it back to their cars.

They stood outside Belton's for a few minutes, and Harry gave out a yawn. Duncan shook his hand. "Harry, you're a good mate." He took hold of the new earring in Harry's ear. "Grow your hair a little longer, and you really will look like a criminal!" He smiled, put his arm around Emma, and walked to her car.

Harry let out a deep breath. "Yeah, I could be a criminal," he whispered, his head still a bit light. "We'd better go, Gab; I don't know how late Dudley was thinking, but..."

"You were wonderful today, Harry," she said, and kissed his cheek. "Mama was right, there just aren't enough sensitive hearts out there any more." She opened the passenger door of her father's sedan. "I'll drive."

On the ride home, he found himself drowsy. His hand was on her leg as she held the steering wheel with both of hers. It had been a day of firsts; his first visit to a swimming pool, his first double date, his first concert. He felt like sleeping, but he was troubled; twice today he'd unwillingly lost control of himself. It was the first time that had ever happened before, but then, Malcolm deserved what he got. He held his hand to his ear. Well, that... that was definitely a first too. What was he going to tell the Dursleys? Somehow he was too tired to even worry. The car was slowing to a stop, and Harry opened his eyes expecting to see Privet Drive, but they were back at the church car park.

"I think we have a few minutes, don't you?" Gabriella turned the ignition off, and changed the station on the radio.

"I really don't feel like driving tonight," Harry muttered.

"Don't be silly," she said slyly, as her eyes twinkled at Harry. Suddenly, he wasn't quite so tired anymore.

Chapter 4 - Tears in the Sunset

Blurred dreams of love and music gave way to the rumblings of traffic passing by on Privet Drive. Harry woke to find himself in bed, the sun already high in the sky. He was trying to remember how exactly he made it home last night, when he heard a car door slam outside, and then another. Slowly, he lurched out of bed, his head a bit achy, and walked over to the window, just catching the Dursleys drive away; they were on their way to church. He scratched his chest preparing to return to bed, when he saw her in the window directly across from his. Already dressed, with her hair again back in a ponytail, she was waving at him madly. She pointed, as if to say don't go, and disappeared from her window. Quickly, Harry tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes, as he heard her front door slam. He stumbled to his dresser, grabbed a comb and tried hopelessly to run it through his hair.

"Ouch!" he cried. He was combing too quickly and caught his ear. Then, he remembered the new piercing. "Oh, yeah," he muttered to himself, then paused and stood back by the bed to see how his earring looked in the mirror. The door to his own house opened and slammed shut. His eyes finally focused, and, seeing the vision before him, a sudden shudder of panic raced through his body, as if he'd plunged into the icy depths of the lake. "Oh, no!" he thought; her steps echoed throughout the house as she raced up the stairs. There's no time! She burst through his door and threw both arms around him. It was a deep kiss. He saw a lightning-bolt hanging from her ear, and he could feel himself being pushed backwards. Suddenly, there was a loud screech at the window.

"Hedwig?" Harry turned, but in the window was a brown tawny owl Harry had never seen before. There was an official looking parchment attached to its leg addressed to him. He took the parchment that had a red wax seal across it with a large H stamped in the middle; Gabriella had her arms around his waist looking over his shoulder.

"You're very popular with the birds." He could tell she was trying to keep her voice calm. "What is it?" Harry knew what it was, the results

of his O.W.L.S.; he wanted to tear them open on the spot, but he knew he couldn't.

"Er, nothing, I can read it later," he answered nervously, as he slid the letter into the top drawer of his dresser. "Where were we?" he asked, turning around to kiss her again, but her eyes had seen it. They were wide, the pupils so large they made her eyes blacker, if that were possible.

"Your... your hair." She was staring past him to his neck. He'd noticed it in the mirror, but what could he do? When he was younger, his Aunt would always try to cut his hair, only to have it re-grow to its original length again by the next morning. He'd never cut it and it had never grown... until today. Overnight it had grown a good three to four inches longer. She put her hand up, almost frightful to touch it, and then brought herself closer as if to see if it were real.

"How... how is it possible?" He tried to stay composed, as if nothing really had happened.

"Do you like it?"

"I... well, yes, but..." There was a familiar hoot in the window.

This time it was Hedwig, back from her errand to Fred and George. She had a modestly sized package and seemed put off that there was another owl in Harry's room. The package she was carrying contained something moving inside it. Harry took it from the owl's leg, gave the two birds a treat, and sent the tawny flying on its way, while Hedwig returned to her cage to rest.

"That's more than just a letter, it's a parcel! How many people send packages with owls? She doesn't seem big enough to carry a package that large." Gabriella watched the first owl fly away, but then turned on Harry waiting for answers, lots of answers. The package in his hand kept squirming.

"They're nothing, really," he said unconvincingly, as he tried to put the new package in another drawer of his dresser, but it wouldn't fit. It

was emblazoned with three W's and he was sure Fred and George had sent something special with their reply.

"Who are you kidding, Harry. What's going on?" He was cornered, and he didn't like it. "That 'H', it looked official. What does H stand for? Hogwarts?" She'd remembered the book and was putting it together; it was like watching a black-haired Hermione in action. "Is that your... your school?" He didn't like being pressed like this in his own bedroom, and the pounding in his head from the activities of the night before became more pronounced. "That mirror, last night; did you kick it, or did it just shatter?" He had no idea what to say, as the air in the room began to grow thin, and he attempted to catch his breath. "And Malcolm, Emma told me he ran from you screaming while you stood there with boiling hot drinks," she said calmly, stepping towards him as he stepped back. "And now... now your hair." Her voice was almost analytical, and that made Harry angrier. Trapped in his own room, he exploded in the only way he knew how.

"Shut up!" he yelled. Gabriella stopped her advance. "It's none of your business! You... you wanted to date a criminal? Well... well criminals don't say crap when they don't want to, especially to nosey busybodies sticking their nose in where it doesn't belong! And... and if you don't like it... bugger off! Go on! GET OUT!" He was advancing on her now.

He thought about what she'd done to Malcolm in the park; she could have thrown him out the window if she wanted, he knew that. He half hoped she would, or at least grab the parchment from his hands and tear it open. She'd know then. He wouldn't have to keep this stupid secret. But instead, her face wilted, and with it so too did Harry's heart. She turned and ran out of his room just as quickly as she had arrived. With each door slamming shut as she sped home, another piece of Harry's spirit drifted away.

"Perfectly perfect, Potter," he scolded himself.

Sitting back on his bed, his shoulders slumped over the package from Fred and George; he let out a sigh, and slowly opened it. A small black furry creature and a silk sack landed in his lap. The creature had a collar around its neck and resembled a sightless mole with no

legs. The collar had a tiny yellow tag with the words “PULL ONLY IN CASE OF EMERGENCY.” He set the creature on his pillow and read the note.

Harry,

First of all, the explosion in London was just an old department store, but nobody's sure who's responsible. It's terrible, but only Muggles were killed. Secondly, please find two enclosed items. The first is your annual dividend as our first and only investor; the shop's been doing gangbusters, and we can't wait to show you our new ideas. We thought you might need some Muggle money so we had Bill work the exchange rate. The second is a gift to celebrate the results of your O.W.L.S. It's a molamar, and there aren't too many of them around England. Let's just say Percy would turn puce if he knew you had one. They don't eat or drink anything, just keep it somewhere warm and dark, and it'll do fine. If you ever find you need to get away in a hurry, a real hurry, pull the cord and hang on. It only works once though, so use it wisely.

See you soon!

Fred & George

“Use it wisely,” he read again--the same words left on a note attached to his father's invisibility cloak he received one Christmas. Harry thought back to when the first owl arrived from Hogwarts that same year; it seemed so long ago. What if he'd never received that letter? What if he never made mirrors shatter, or people blow up like giant balloons? Would it be so bad to be a Muggle? Gabriella would still be here right now. He looked down at his bed; instead he had a molamar on his pillow.

He opened the silk pouch, and found it filled with gold Sovereigns. By the looks of it, there was close to a thousand pounds there. He closed the bag and placed it under the floorboard in his room, then picked the small animal up off his pillow and pulled open the drawer of his dresser. Gently, he placed it under his socks, and he reached for the parchment. He glanced out the window, but her curtains were drawn

shut. Still, his pulse couldn't help but quicken when he broke the wax seal; this was it, his real future.

He unrolled the parchment. The marks were, well, unbelievable. He'd failed Divination and History of Magic, of course, but had received Exceeds Expectations in Charms and Astronomy. He scored Outstandings in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Care of Magical Creatures, and... Potions! He re-read the scores multiple times, at the bottom of the parchment in small print read "Scores have been adjusted, providing students credit for the school's poor oversight."

"Umbridge," Harry whispered. This meant he could be an Auror if he wanted to; he could devote his life to destroying the evil in this world. He jumped up and yelled as loud as he could. For a moment, his mind left the Muggle world, and envisioned his future bringing down Voldemort and his followers. He waved his hand in the air as if holding a wand. "Today you're going to die... Tom," he whispered. There was the slightest pang in his forehead. The phone rang, and Harry ran downstairs to answer it; it was Emma.

"Good morning, Harry!" she said brightly. "I hope you're feeling okay this morning."

"I've been better," replied Harry.

"Well, listen; Duncan's got some news that should cheer you up. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure," said Harry, and a moment later Duncan was on the phone.

"Hey mate! Well, I've talked to the boss at Sunshine Sports, and you can start training today, four pounds an hour. It's not much, but like I said last night, havin' it's better than not. What do you say? Stop by about three and I'll spend a couple hours showing you the ropes."

"Sounds great!" Harry replied, not even considering the money he now had upstairs. "I'll see you at three," he said, and hung up the receiver, not really caring why his head was aching so. It seemed the Wizarding world would have to wait for Potter the Auror; today, he

had a different job--a job in the Muggle world selling sporting goods. He would prove to himself he could make it on his own.

He went upstairs, showered, dressed, and tried to do something with the new look. How was he going to explain his hair to Duncan? But after two hours training, Duncan hadn't mentioned a thing. Harry had just finished learning why footballs were very different from basketballs, when, for the first time that day, Duncan asked a question that had nothing to do with work.

"So, how's Gabriella?" Something in his voice told Harry he knew what had happened, and something in Harry's expression told Duncan the answer. Before Harry could answer, Duncan continued, "Listen, mate, women are a strange breed. She'll get over it; just stay cool, and you two will work it out, you'll see." The words helped a little, and Harry was glad to have a friend he could talk with, even if he didn't say much.

For the next few days, Harry spent his afternoons in the shop, mostly organizing the shelves, and helping customers with questions. The Dursleys were actually happy that Harry was working at a Muggle job. First, it kept him out of the house, and second he was so tired when he came home he usually just went to bed after dinner. In fact, it was at the dinner table that they brought it up in hopes that Dudley might consider getting a job. Dudley said he'd think about it, and then asked for seconds. As far as Harry's longer hair, it only caused Aunt Petunia to look at him with fierce disapproval, to which he simply shrugged his shoulders and asked for seconds. Only Dudley was successful. What she didn't see hidden behind his locks was an earring that matched his scar.

Aside from constantly harping on Harry to do more garden work, the Dursleys were growing less bothersome. Still, his evenings were far from enjoyable; each night he'd come to his room, look out his window only to see her curtains drawn, and then collapse on his bed. He'd sleep for a couple hours then leave to walk the streets. He was, in fact, miserable.

On this particular evening, he found himself in the park again, hanging from an old tire swing. It was going to be another fiery-red

sunset, but Harry didn't much notice. Duncan had asked if he wanted to join him and Emma for a bite to eat, but Harry passed; honestly, he hadn't felt much like eating for days. He kicked off the ground with his foot, as if launching on his Firebolt, only to swing back down to earth. He kept re-writing the scene that played out in his room with Gabriella, and yet, no matter how he tried to come up with better words to say, or actions to take, it always ended with her finding out he was a wizard.

But then, how could she not know, even now? Is that why she'd been avoiding him? That somehow she knew he was something strange, something different, a danger? It tore at him to think that she might believe him really dangerous; that she might be frightened he would hurt her. She was smart, yes, but putting Harry in wizard's clothing was a far stretch for any Muggle imagination. He walked over to the same tree where the two of them had confronted Malcolm. It started here; it would end here. He would just put her out of his mind; it was just a bit of Occlumency. He sat. He tried to make his mind go blank, but felt somewhere inside, small pieces of his soul had disappeared. He imagined her eyes twinkling back at him, his body shuddered, and he put his face in his hands. People had scorned him before, feared him, despised him, and he was able to let it go. "Let it go," he thought, but tears began to well up inside him. "She hates me," he said aloud.

"No she doesn't," whispered a familiar voice. He sat frozen, his face still buried in his hands. "She could never hate you." Two hands took his and pulled them gently away from his face. A tear fell from his cheek as he looked up into her eyes, two black stones on which the rain had been falling. She knelt next to him with her hand against his face.

"I'm so sorry," he said, "I never should have..." She held her hand to his mouth.

"No. I'm sorry," she said, "I was behaving like a four year old. You were right, I was a nosey busybody." Harry winced at the words. "No, I barged in on you without permission, and then started grilling you like I was my father or something. I was horrible." Harry shook his head. "I don't care where you go to school; I don't care what others say about you. If I ever poke my nose in where it doesn't belong, tell

me off. I just..." she paused, "I just need you to know that you've captured my heart." Her eyes fell to the ground, and then she looked back at him, holding her hand over his chest. "I only hope that there's some of your heart left for me," a tear let loose down her face. It caught the setting sun, golden-red, like a tiny fireball falling from the heavens, then, a silvery glint reflected into his eye; on her ear hung a tiny lighting-bolt.

He stood up, grasping her hand and taking her with him; he looked at the sunset, and turned to her. "One day, I want you to show me how your sun plunges into the sea," he said, holding her close, "because you have more than my heart... I love you," he whispered, and then bending close, he kissed her. Harry felt a surge of warmth pass through his body, and his neck began to tingle. That night and the many that preceded Duncan's birthday, Harry didn't return to number four, Privet Drive, until well after everyone else had gone to bed.

On the day of Duncan's birthday, Harry was in the shop putting out a new display of golf balls. An older man in a bright pink polo shirt, checkered pants, and a green hat greeted him with a great smile and a small bow. His eyebrows were very long and white, and he wore a purple paisley scarf around his neck.

"Can I help you, sir?" Harry asked. The old man let out the slightest laugh and shook his head.

"No, I think you've already done plenty, more than anyone should ask of a child. Still, there are others who hope you'll do more. Enjoy your youth my son." He gave another small bow with a nod of his head, and left the store.

"Couldn't find what he was lookin' for?" Duncan shouted from a few rows over.

"I think he was just checking prices," Harry called back, as he watched the wizard walk down the street past the storefront windows. Well, he looked like a wizard, anyway.

As the sun began to set, Harry and Gabriella strolled arm-in-arm to Duncan's home from Privet Drive. The way Duncan told the story, he

was to go with his parents on vacation to France for two weeks, but had asked if he could stay at home, to earn some more money. They agreed, and he now had the whole house to himself. Their gift, for his seventeenth birthday, was that he could host his party at the house, as long as they returned to find it in the same shape they left it. By the time Harry and Gabriella arrived, the place was packed, and Harry seriously doubted Duncan would be able to keep his promise. A few of the people in the house Harry knew from his days at school in Little Whinging. Quite a few remembered him too, and most wanted to ask about Brutus's school for criminals. To his dismay, far from being shunned for this like he had been in the past, he found himself quite the infamous celebrity.

"What did you do to get in there, anyway?" one kid asked.

"Are you kidding?" another responded. "Last year he nearly killed his cousin! Wish you had Harry, he and his pals are just thugs. After it happened, Dudley wouldn't come out of the house for two weeks, and Harry wasn't even around!"

Harry said nothing; the chatter seemed to make Gabriella raise her eyebrows, but she simply smiled and held his arm closer. They made their way to the guest of honor who was busy mixing the night's punch.

"Harry! Gabriella!" called out Duncan, as he shoved one of his pals on the shoulder. "Move over you!" They came closer. "Punch with a punch!" he said with a sly grin, and pouring a bottle of clear liquid into the bowl. "You inspired me Harry! White Lightning!" Harry took a mental note to limit himself to one cup tonight. "Emma's upstairs still. Why she takes so long to get ready is beyond me. Harry could you put those on?" He directed Harry to some CDs on the counter.

Snaking through the crowd with Gabriella they found the sound system. He looked through the selection and found "The Steel Chords--Into the Darkness." He popped it into the player, and before long many of the guests were dancing. Harry was in a sea of happiness, and he seemed to draw life from it. He'd always hated the Muggle world. At first, he had thought of Hermione's parents as the exception, then Gabriella and her family, then Emma and Duncan;

the circle was growing wider every day. Harry looked up and saw Emma climbing down the staircase, a large cake in her hand lit with candles. He silenced the music, and everyone began to sing Happy Birthday, and as the cheers ebbed away, Duncan raised his voice. "To the best mates in the world!" he bellowed as he raised his glass, his eyes turned toward Harry.

"Here, here!" Harry yelled, holding his cup high in the air, and all drank.

It was late before the last guests left. The music had stopped, and Duncan surveyed the damage. "Well... jist a few paper cupses to pick up," he slurred, staggering to reach one, and knocking over a lamp instead. He was in pretty bad shape.

"Come on, baby," Emma said, grabbing him around the waist, "let's get you upstairs. Harry, could you give me a hand?"

"Sure." He grabbed Duncan from the other side, as Gabriella started picking up the rubbish. Although Harry, having forgotten his mental note, was a little unsteady himself, they got the blonde upstairs and into bed. He started babbling gibberish.

"I'll bet Europe's not so bad when yeh don't have yer kid around to bother yeh. 'Scuse me, but did anybody see Todd? Yeh know what, Harry, I think yeh could use another pair of trainers, what are yeh... size ten? Thank god, Emma's come teh save me."

"Oh, dear," said Emma, concerned more about Duncan's pallid color than his babbling. "I better get something just in case." Quickly, she left to go downstairs.

"Yer a real mate, mate," Duncan muttered into his pillow. "Yeh ever need anythin', hear me, anythin', yeh just call on ol' Duncan, eh?" He turned to look at Harry. "Hear me?"

"You bet Duncan," said Harry with a smile as he pulled the sheet up over his friend.

“And don’t ever let her go, eh? She’s got your number she has, keep her close, Harry! You two together are magic mate, pure magic. Ask Em! She’s special too. Eh, Em? Well, Em knows. We’re bound by thorns, did yeh know that Harry? Keep her close.... Where’s Em?”

“Right here, Dunc,” she said as she walked past Harry, carrying a large plastic bucket and then setting it at Duncan’s bedside. “He usually doesn’t, but better safe than sorry.” Harry walked on downstairs; amazingly, Gabriella already had most of the rooms clean. The kitchen had two large rubbish bins filled with paper cups and plates. He wished he had remembered his mental note; his head was starting to pound a little. Gabriella tossed another plastic cup away, and washed her hands.

“I told Emma I’d finish, but she says she’ll take care of it in the morning. Duncan doesn’t need to work, thankfully, how about you?”

Harry was rubbing his temples, trying to take in what Duncan had said. “Huh? Er, no, no. I’m off.”

“Excellent; I think I have a few ideas on how we might spend it.” She grinned, and her eyes were twinkling again. “Emma’s been really helpful tonight.”

After saying their goodbyes, the two started off down the sidewalk. The night was warm, and most the homes had their windows open. They were approaching her house, when they heard the sound of shouting; it was her parents again. Harry hadn’t noticed them fighting for quite some time. “Gabriella, it’s nothing bad I hope.”

“No, nothing bad,” she sighed, but Harry doubted her sincerity.

“Come on, you can tell me.”

“No... No I can’t,” she said sharply, but then kissed him gently goodnight. “I’ll see you tomorrow then?” He nodded, and watched her cross the street. When she entered, the shouting stopped. A few seconds later she had drawn her curtains open, a match flashed, and the glow of candlelight filled her room.

As for the Dursley home, it was dark. The other day, Harry had paid Dudley four pounds to make him a spare key; he slid it in the lock and slipped upstairs. The first thing he did when he entered his room was to go to the window; across the street, Gabriella sat, writing again. His vision, somewhat hazy, Harry could swear she was writing with a quill. He grinned; she'd thought his was such a brilliant idea after all. He could hear a siren in the distance, and as he looked up at the sky, searching for a moon that was not there, and for no reason in particular his mind turned to Remus Lupin. He would not be a werewolf tonight. "Two weeks to rest," Harry whispered.

Harry wondered what sort of lifelong torture such a fate would mean. When Harry first returned to Privet Drive, he was feeling sorry for himself for being isolated and alone. How was Remus doing now that his dearest friend had once again been taken from him? Harry cursed himself for being so juvenile; he'd forgotten about those that were truly lonely. He'd forgotten Remus who was hated by his own wizard kind; he'd forgotten Hagrid, despised by many as a half-giant, who'd been like a father to Harry, or maybe a big brother... a really big, big brother. For a moment, Harry drunkenly smiled to himself, but then immediately frowned; what were they all doing now? Surely Voldemort's Death Eaters, or the Dementors now serving him, were on the move?

The siren stopped, and the ruffle of wings was carried on the warm summer breeze. An owl appeared at Harry's window with a parchment; it had been quite some time since he'd received any unasked for post. His head was still spinning as he took the note, gave the owl a treat, and sent it on her way. Hedwig chirped. "Just a minute girl, I may have something for you to do." He opened the note, it was from Hermione.

Harry,

Sorry it's been so long since our last letter. Holiday was wonderful. I'm staying with the Weasleys until school starts. Mr. Weasley seems to always be at the Ministry now, and lately Mrs. Weasley's been gone an awful lot. So, I offered to help out. It's pretty quiet around here with only Ron and Ginny. Fred and George pop in and out every so often, wanting us to try some new scheme or another. I'm not too

sure what Mrs. Weasley thinks, but their dad is beaming, but of course there's still the occasional meeting.

We can't wait to get you here; Fred and George have offered to help out. Be ready for an exceptional birthday present! Dumbledore was here this morning and suggested you'd rather stay with the Dursleys this year. Ron looked at him as if he were mad! But Dumbledore simply smiled and said "Things change." Hah, as if! I hope they're not treating you too awfully. Anyway look for us on your birthday!

Love,

Hermione

"OUR last letter?" Harry repeated to himself out loud. "So you two were off with the Order, weren't you?" Instantly, his temper ebbed to the surface. "We must protect poor Harry, mustn't we?" He threw the letter on the floor, and grabbed some parchment. He'd tell them all off for keeping him out of things again, for thinking he was too incapable of... and then the blood drained from his head to his feet. "My birthday?" he squeaked. "No, not next week, I need more time!" Quickly he scrunched the parchment he was scribbling on and tossed it aside. He took a deep breath, trying to clear his head, and with some effort began to write.

Hermione,

Dumbledore's right! Things do change; the Dursleys have been smashing. I think I'll need the rest of the summer to get to know them better. Don't come to get me, I'll see you and Ron on the train.

Be careful!

Harry

"There," he whispered to himself; it wasn't great, but it'd do. He tied the parchment to Hedwig's leg and sent her to the window. "Get it to them tonight; you need to stop their plans!" She flew off, disappearing into the night sky. Harry looked down to see Gabriella, holding her candle and looking straight back at him. She was smiling as she held

the flame up to her lips, a golden twinkle flashed across her eyes,
and the room went dark.

Chapter 5 - The Test

Light was beaming in through the window, when Harry heard a rattling noise in his room. His face was buried in his pillow, and his head was telling him not to move; he half turned to look with one eye, but that was no use. His newfound hair was covering his face like a thatched roof, and he didn't seem to have the strength to lift his hand to move it away. There was a familiar hoot.

"Hedwig?" His voice was hoarse and scratchy, "Hedwig, come over here girl." The snowy owl obliged and lit on Harry's bed; slowly, he reached up and untied the parchment attached to her leg. He tried to blow the hair out of his eyes without moving his head, and unrolled the scroll; it was from Ron.

He didn't bloody believe that Harry would ever want to stay at the Dursley's, and were they holding him there against his will, because if they were he'd see the whole Order come and snatch Harry away again. Ron's letter went on, saying that Harry knew ways to get the truth to them, and they'd be there in an instant. But, if he really did want to stay there, then their birthday gift was a bust, and what did Harry want?

Harry had missed a few words here or there, but he figured he'd got the gist of the letter; it dropped to the floor. He stroked Hedwig and she flew back to her cage. Lifting up ever so slightly, he tried to look to see what time it was, but the moment his head left the pillow the whole room spun upside down as if he were back in the maze of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He quickly grabbed his pillow for a firmer foundation. "Note to self..." he thought. "No more drinking with Duncan." The house was silent when outside a car roared by, the sound of the engine pounding in his head. He groaned, wishing it hadn't been so hot that he needed to keep the window open.

He tried to focus his mind on last evening's events, but it was like looking into a crystal ball in Trelawney's Divination class--pure fog. After a few minutes and some deep breaths, he began to remember... her parents were arguing again, and she wouldn't tell me, but who was he to talk? Duncan saying that Emma knew something... something about him being magic... about them being

magical together. It was too difficult to put the pieces together in his mind, and he couldn't stay in bed all day; Gabriella had some plans. Flat on his face, he slowly turned one leg out on to the floor, and then the other. He was on his knees, still clutching his pillow to his head, when the front door opened and shut; footsteps were coming up the stairs. He was sure it was Uncle Vernon coming to tell him to mow the lawn.

"Please don't yell... please don't yell," was all he could think when the footsteps stopped outside in the hallway. "Well, what are you waiting for?" He half turned his head to the door, peaking through his hair when it opened. It wasn't Vernon or Petunia; it was her. She was wearing white shorts and sandals, and was carrying something in her hand. That's all he could manage without turning his head further, which he knew would be a massive mistake. She sighed, clucking her tongue.

"I thought you might need some help, here, drink this. Mama says it'll do the trick, something to do with quail eggs and... well, you don't want to know." She knelt down beside him and handed him a glass. "Take a sip."

He gingerly lifted his head up just enough to pour a few drops into his mouth. He could feel the liquid burn a little as it went down his throat, but almost instantly the throbbing in his temples began to recede. She helped him turn around and sit, his back against the bed, and then sat next to him.

"Drink the rest."

He obliged, and in a few short minutes he was feeling much better.

"Your Uncle and Dudley left early this morning, and your aunt left about ten minutes ago. She was all dressed up for something."

Harry remembered muttering, "Hairdresser," as he began to straighten up. "She always tries to look as good as she can before she goes. She'll be there for a couple of hours." He put his hand down and found Ron's parchment. They both looked at it and Gabriella stood up.

“Look, I have to go; I just wanted to make sure you were okay, and now you are.”

“No, wait.” Harry tried to get to his feet, but the room still wanted to tilt a bit, and as he began to tumble, Gabriella held his arm. “Don’t go, not yet.” He stood straight and brought her towards him. “We’ve got the day together, right?”

“Yes, of course,” she said with a broad smile.

“And you have a few thoughts on how we might spend it?” It was his eyes now that were twinkling.

“Actually,” she said slyly, “I do.” She ran her finger down his chest toward his navel. “And do you want to know how the morning starts?” Her thumb was drawing circles around his belly button. Harry nodded his head smiling. “With you getting showered and dressed!” She kissed him quickly on the lips and turned to the door. “You have fifteen minutes, and then we need to go!”

“But, but I thought...,” he stammered.

She eyed him slyly with a broad smile. “Don’t be silly,” she said, and closed the door behind her. Harry stood for a moment his mouth open, and then shaking his head, reached down to pick up Ron’s letter. He was feeling much better really. He set it down on his dresser and headed to the shower.

It took him every bit of fifteen minutes to get ready; he was tying the lace on his trainer, when he heard her call, “Come on! Come on!” He ran out to find her standing by her father’s sedan, another car parked in the driveway. “It’s mine!” she said, her eyes beaming.

“What?”

“Papa just bought a car!” Harry glanced at the new car parked in the drive; a deep metallic burgundy, full sized four door. He could see Uncle Vernon turning green already. “And the old one is mine! Come on, get in, we only have a few minutes.”

She drove to the town square where the open-air concert had been held, and quickly parked the car. Harry was at a loss, and Gabriella was saying nothing behind her white smile. She had given him some bread to eat in the car, and he brushed the crumbs off the front of his shirt as he raced after her. She was heading up some steps, and stopped short of the door. "Here, you'll need these." She handed Harry an old piece of yellow paper, and a bright pink one. "And, you'll need these." She held up her keys. Harry stared blankly. "Go on. Go on!" She pushed them into his hand and closed his fingers. "I'll wait here till you're done!" And she pushed him through the door.

Inside a number of people were filling in papers. He caught the eye of one of the guys he'd seen at Duncan's party the night before, his eyes were bloodshot and his hair uncombed. "Hey, Steve!" said Harry as he waved.

"Hey, you takin' the test too?" Steve asked, managing a weak smile, and slowly turning his head back to his paper.

"Test?" Harry breathed.

"Excuse me son, are those your papers?" A frumpy man in his forties was looking at Harry, and holding out his hand. Without thinking, without looking, Harry handed him the papers that Gabriella had given him. "Yes... okay... very well, looks like your provisional is in order... and I see it's your birthday, take this and sit over there." Giving Harry back his papers, he also handed him a booklet, paper and pencil. Harry looked down; it was his theory exam. The booklet was filled with driving questions, and the answers were to be recorded on the white sheet. He looked toward the front door, and thought of taking off, and then looked back down to the paper. "But I'm not old enough," he thought. He opened up the yellow paper; it was his birth certificate, or at least it looked like his birth certificate, only it had Harry turning seventeen yesterday.

"Duncan," he whispered, and then looking to the door he said, "Gabriella." With that, he decided to give it a go. It soon became clear why Gabriella had been quizzing him lately while they drove about town, and after about thirty minutes, he thought he'd answered most

of the questions correctly. He took his exam paper up to the front desk where the man took the it and slipped it into a machine. "Very good," he said, "thirty-two correct; you pass. Here's a sheet you should review covering your mistakes. Do you want to take the practical today to have your provisional stamped?"

"Er... sure," said Harry, shrugging his shoulders.

"Very well, sit down over here," the man said. Harry took a seat and had his eyes examined by a girl not much older than he.

"I like your earring" she said and winked, placing some picture cards in front of him. "What colours do you see in this picture?" A few moments later he was standing near the front door waiting for another examiner. When she stepped from around a partition, he had the distinct impression he was looking at a younger Professor McGonagall; her hair was tied up in a bun, and she carried a clipboard and pen. "Your car?" she asked curtly.

"Erm, just outside." Harry took the keys from his pocket, and stepped out the door. Gabriella was nowhere to be seen. The examiner had him drive the car around a few blocks, do some maneuvers, and then demonstrate his parking skills in the same church car park where Gabriella had taught him the ropes. He thought back and smiled.

"Very well," she said, "you may return." They pulled in front of the examination office and stepped in. "Take this and hand it to the front desk," she said briskly, and then strode over to Steve, who was sleeping in his chair. Harry took the form to the desk and handed it to the man, along with his provisional.

"Yes, very good." He typed some things in the computer and a few minutes later handed Harry the pink piece of paper. "Your stamped provisional, you're legal to drive on your own, only cars or motorbikes. You can file this," he said handing him another paper, "to receive your permanent license. If you were to do that today, your permanent card should arrive to your home address," he paused looking down at his papers, "number five Privet Drive, in about ten days. Be safe, lad, and obey the laws." Harry could hardly believe his ears. The whole thing

took about two hours, and when he stepped out the door, he saw Gabriella sitting on the hood of her car.

“Well?” she called.

Harry held up his pink paper. “I passed!” he yelled back.

“I knew you’d do it!” She ran over to him and gave him a kiss. “I’d have died, if you hadn’t; let me see, let me see.” She took the paper from Harry’s hand as they walked to the car. “You know, of course, this means you’ll have to take me with you wherever you go.”

“That’s easy, since it’s your car,” said Harry smiling.

“I’d say this deserves a celebration! How about lunch?” She climbed in the passenger side, but Harry hesitated. “Oh Harry, you just took some old steel-eyed woman around in this car, and were fine. I don’t think I’m that much of a distraction am I?” He climbed in and turned the ignition.

“Well, if you were wearing a swimsuit, AND had a clipboard... maybe. Where to?” he asked.

“Duncan gave me a two-for-one coupon to Belton’s; what do you say?”

Before long they were eating fish and chips by the window, as the day grew warm while they watched the people walking by. Finally he asked, “Okay, I have to know; how did you do it?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly. Emma kind of helped. Last night she mentioned Duncan was going to get his provisional today now that he was turning seventeen. I told her how I’d tried to teach you after we’d been swimming,” she said. “Emma’s eyes lit on fire with excitement. This morning she came by handing me the birth certificate. She started by scanning Duncan’s, changed the names around, printed it out, and tumbled it in the dryer.”

Harry looked at it again. “It looks real to me.”

"I know," she said. "She works magic with that computer of hers." At first the words didn't seem to concern Harry, but in the back of his mind they seemed to grow. Innocent enough, right? But something was bothering him, and he couldn't get his mind around it.

"I understand we're not supposed to right after eating," she paused to sip her drink, "but what do you say we go to the pool?"

"I don't have my stuff."

"It's in the car," she replied, and her eyes twinkled. She had purchased towels and a new suit for Harry. "Well, while you were having fun, I had to do something; besides, you definitely needed a suit that fits you better."

Even though it was a weekday, the pool was packed. At the gate, Gabriella had opened her bag before they even had a chance to ask. Harry recognized a few faces from last night's party, most resting in lounge chairs, and sipping drinks. As they picked their way through the crowd there were a few who called their names, one of them, Thad Xavier, came up to Harry and said, "Some party last night, eh!" Harry and Gabriella nodded, but then Thad turned squarely to Harry, turning a shoulder to Gabriella. "Good to see you at the pool, Harry." There was far too much emphasis on the word 'you', and Gabriella knew what it meant instantly. "You've run Dudley's gang out of here; Malcolm won't step foot in this place. Good going!" Harry looked around and found quite a number of people were looking in his direction, a few flashing him the thumbs up.

They found an open spot and laid out their towels. "Gabriella," he said softly, holding her hand, "he didn't mean..."

"Oh yes he did!" she snapped, and then squeezed Harry's hand. "They all mean it, Harry; don't forget that. I've seen children, half your age, carrying rifles to kill people because they wore different color robes. Whole villages have been slaughtered because they prayed to the wrong god. When they point their sites at you for being different, Harry, when they hold a knife to the throat of your...." her voice trailed off and she looked away.

His mind slipped back in time only a few months to his battle with Bellatrix; she had called him a half-blood, and had used the Cruciatus curse on Neville simply for fun. Was Thad so different from Bellatrix? A voice inside told him yes, but by how much?

"Come on," he said, "let's go for a swim." Gabriella nodded, and they both jumped in the cool water. The sun was glinting off the silver lightning-bolt that dangled from her ear; it was brilliant, flashing against her dark skin. "How could anybody not think she was the most beautiful creature that walked the earth?" he thought.

She caught him looking at her, and something about the expression on his face made her smile. She swam closer and gave him a kiss. "I do like your hair, you know." And she splashed him with a face full of water, laughed, and swam away.

The number of swimmers had thinned in half by the time they'd gathered their things to go. He hadn't slept much the night before, and the day had been very long. A few kids said goodbye as they made their way to the exit. He had been happy just being one of the crowd in Little Whinging, but his name was gathering celebrity, and it was making him uncomfortable. He just wanted to be invisible.

"Oh no!" Gabriella gasped.

He'd been holding Gabriella's hand, mindlessly walking to her car. Looking up, he saw it. On the hood was the word 'Beware'. They ran to the car. "It's only shaving cream," sighed Harry. But then, looking closer, he saw that the tires had been slashed. Gabriella began to tremble with rage.

"Safer?" she shrieked. "Is this safer, Papa?" she yelled again to the air. She took her fists and pounded the hood. "I'm so stupid!" She pounded again, each time crying out, "Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" Harry pulled her close, and held her tight. Finally, she took a deep breath. "Always the hero," she said softly into his chest. He stroked her hair, wondering what she meant; he hadn't been much of hero this summer.

People leaving the pool passed them standing there as if nothing had happened. "Is nobody going to offer a hand?" Harry thought. After five minutes, he looked at her and said, "We'd better call your parents."

Gabriella wiped the tears from her eyes. "No... no, Papa will be at work, and Mama can't," she sniffed, "can't drive."

It would be a long walk, and calling the Dursleys was definitely out of the question. He was thinking of trying Duncan when someone called out, "Harry... Gab... Oh my god, what's happened?" It was another kid he'd met at Duncan's party the night before, he couldn't remember his name, but before long, a few more had gathered around the car. One of the girls was holding Gabriella, while Harry talked with some of the others.

Within minutes, there was a beehive of activity. One of the guys had been working a summer job driving a tow-truck. "Stand pat, mate," he said. "I'll get you and the car to the shop. I'll be back in ten minutes," he called as he ran off.

Someone else was bringing food from the snack bar. Harry looked up surprised to see it was the same man who had insisted he search Gabriella's bag on their first visit. "It'll just go to waste," he muttered as he passed Gabriella a sandwich and drink. "We'll be closing soon anyway."

Another kid Harry didn't recognize turned and said, "Harry, me da' sells tires; I've been workin' there all summer, and I know we can get yeh a good deal, but they still won' be cheap."

"I'm sorry, I've forgotten..."

"Wes, Wes Tucker," he said with a broad smile as he shook Harry's hand.

"Wes, I can get you the money," Harry whispered, "but let's keep it between you and me, eh?"

Before long, the car had been towed, and they'd been given a lift to the shop where the tires were being repaired. Quite a few of his new-

found friends were still hanging around, but as the task neared completion, one-by-one they said goodbye and filtered out the door. The sun had long set, as Wes called out, "That's it! Good as new; better really!" He wore a broad smile as he wiped his hands on a rag and walked over to the two of them.

Gabriella looked up at him. "Wes, I can give you..."

"Close that purse up, Gab; it's taken care of."

"What? How?"

He looked a bit uncomfortable, then seemed to hit gold. "Er, a customer turned those in today fer a new set. They were jus' headed teh be recycled, but they still have some good tread on 'em. It'd just be me labor, and that's no charge."

"Oh, you're wonderful!" she cried, and wrapped her arms around him in a huge hug. Harry simply winked.

On the way home, Gabriella drove. "I think it drives a bit better, what do you think?"

Once again, Harry had found himself drifting to sleep in her car. "What? Oh, yeah, drives great." He looked at the park passing by and thought of Malcolm. "You know, it might have been me they were trying to intimidate."

"What? Why you?"

"Dudley's gang; I can tell they haven't enjoyed Dudley holding them back this summer."

"But it's my car, not even Malcolm would..."

"Wouldn't he?" Harry interrupted. "I was the one driving when we got to the pool. Maybe he saw me get out and thought, 'Here's my chance.'"

"It doesn't matter, Harry; if they slashed the tires, whoever they were, it means they had knives." There was a moment's silence. "And... knives kill, Harry," she said with an unusual tremor in her voice. They turned down Privet Drive, and she stopped to let him sneak out before she pulled into her driveway. As he began to open the door, he stopped and looked at Gabriella.

"Did you notice?" he asked. "The man with the sandwiches?"

"Yes."

"I don't know; maybe... maybe there's still some hope. Do you think?"

"Harry," she stroked his face and kissed him, "with you at my side, I think we might just change the world."

"Can it wait till tomorrow? I'm beat," he sighed, and then grinned and stepped out of the car, gently shutting the door. Gabriella leaned toward the open window.

"I think we started tonight. They seemed to rally around you, Harry. It's your heart, everyone can see that. You were marvelous, goodnight." Harry stuck his head through the window and gave her a quick kiss. She looked at him for a moment and her eyes began to twinkle. "I love you," she breathed, then rolled up the window and drove away.

"What?" he stammered, but she was gone. He watched her pull into the driveway and disappear into the house. "I love you, too," he whispered to himself.

A cloud had rolled in front of the quarter moon, and suddenly the street had become quite dark. Harry walked toward his front steps, thinking about tomorrow. The warm air carried the sweet scent of dampness. "Rain, tonight." he thought, looking back up at the darkening sky. He was moving up the walkway, when he heard a crack like a branch snapping. Instinctively, he reached for his back pocket, but it was empty. This morning, he had left his wand in his trunk upstairs. He looked toward his darkened window, and then across the street; he could see the soft light of candle flickering off

the walls in Gabriella's room. The wind began to pick up, as he looked toward the sound. In the street was a stooped, hooded figure. Harry's heart leapt.

Mixed with a gust of wind he heard, "Little Harry!" It was a woman's voice, he'd heard it before, and he'd heard those words before. Bellatrix?

The woman advanced, lifting her hand, and Harry stepped back, but his foot caught the lower step, and he fell backwards. He couldn't catch himself in time, before his head hit the upper step, and his eyes saw a blinding flash of white. He could hear her running toward him, but he couldn't see; his head was spinning. He was trying to lift himself up, when she grabbed him by the shoulders. He spun to strike when...

"Are you okay, dear?"

It was Mrs. Figg. Harry lowered his hand. "Well, boy, are you okay? The fog was slowly clearing from Harry's head, and he began to focus on the elderly woman's face.

"Mrs. Figg?" She brought him to his feet. "Is that you?"

"Harry Potter, have you been drinking?" she said sharply.

"My head... I fell. Have you been watching me?"

"Watching you?" she chuckled. "Heavens no. I was just up at the market getting some milk." She brought her face in close, sniffed, and apparently satisfied let go of his arm and stepped back. "I should think you, of all people, would know better than to be wandering the streets alone at this time of night. If Dumbledore knew..."

Harry hadn't thought too much about Dumbledore. "Is he having me trailed again this year?" His eyes glanced back down the street. "Because if he is, I want them to stop. Tell him that I don't..."

"No one's trailing you, Harry," she cut in. "I've been told specifically to let you have your leave. But I would think you'd still come to visit on

occasion. It seems you're getting on better with the Dursleys, I hear." Her voice carried a hint of disbelief.

"Well, I... er, yeah. They're loads better this year. Dudley's even talking to me."

"And you'll be staying through the summer?"

"I hope so."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with Mrs. Darbinyan's cooking?"

"I thought you said..."

"Well, I'm not blind boy. Mind you, I haven't said anything, but you'd best watch yourself. You don't know anything about these people. For all you know they could be..."

"They're not terrorists!" he snapped.

"Idiot, boy, for all you know they could be working for him."

"Well, they're not; I'd know. I've seen the likes that work for Voldemort, and they're not it."

"Very well, very well." She picked up her shopping bag. "Just remember, all that glitters is not gold. He's turned brother on brother, friend on friend, husband on wife. Don't delude yourself into thinking it couldn't happen."

He watched her for a while walk down the street toward her waiting cats. He glanced up at Gabriella's window. The light still flickered. Had she seen? The day of her first arrival, he had wondered if her family was in league with Voldemort. "You are an idiot, boy," he thought to himself. "Not everything and everyone has to do with Voldemort." He climbed the steps and went inside.

Quietly, he slipped in to the Dursley living room, and made his way up the stairs, rubbing the back of his head. The only sound was the rhythmic snore from Uncle Vernon reverberating through the walls.

When he opened the door to his bedroom, he let out a small gasp of surprise. Standing in front of him was George Weasley, and on Harry's bed, covered in blood, was George's twin brother Fred.

Chapter 6 - Dudley's Confession

"Hello, Harry!" said George with a bit of pomp and a broad smile. "Wonderful evening, don't you think?" At that moment the rain began to fall. "Well, it was wonderful. Goodness! Look at his hair Fred! A new look, Harry? And what's that I see on your ear, can it be...."

Harry held his hands up. "Shhh, you'll wake them."

"Who, the Dumbsleys?" asked George.

Fred sat with one of Harry's T-shirts over his face, it was soaked in blood. "I thought you were getting on smashingly," he mumbled through the shirt.

"What happened? Skiving snack box?" asked Harry.

"No," said George, "he accidentally apparated onto your bed, fell off and smashed his face into the dresser there." Harry looked; the lamp had fallen over.

"I thought the bed was over there!" gripped Fred through the T-shirt as he rubbed his knee.

"It was," Harry answered, "but I was cleaning up and..."

"And you moved it? Don't you know anything? You never..."

"Never mind that," George interrupted. He walked over to his twin and pointed his wand at the bloodied face; a blue light bathed Fred's fading freckles and the bleeding stopped. "Ron told us you were staying, and why. We don't buy it for a minute." George began to survey the room.

"So," Fred sighed, wriggling his nose with his fingers, "we're here to see if it's true." He looked at the bloodstained shirt and handed it to Harry. "Er... sorry." He stood up and looked out at the rain. "George, what do you think?" He raised his hands as if boxing in a marquee. "Fickle Furniture--Make your mother-in-law think twice before she pops in! Well?"

“Not bad, we can make furniture that moves randomly by itself! Recordra!” He scribbled something in the air with his wand, and a parchment appeared in his hand. He then tucked it into the sleeve of his green jacket. “But, we’re here to check on dear Harry.”

“Really, I’m fine,” Harry said, a bit too convincingly. “They’ve been much, much better, why just the other day we, uh,” he paused searching for something to say, “we selected judges for the Suburban Lawn Contest!”

“Right!” exclaimed George. “And this is better because...?”

Fred let out a high-pitched two-tone whistle. “Oh my!”

George turned to the window. “What?”

“Harry has a neighbor!” he said with a sing-songy voice.

Harry could tell this was going to be bad. “It’s nothing. They moved in a few weeks back is all.” He walked to the curtains to close them, but that only made the twins realize they had something.

“A neighbor?” George asked whimsically, as he pushed Harry aside and looked out the window. The rain was falling steadily. Across the street Gabriella sat, again in pure white. The candlelight seemed to make her face glow as she wrote by the flickering flame. “Well, mate, what’s her name?”

“I, er, don’t know; haven’t really met her.”

“Haven’t met her?” Fred asked, raising his wand. “Accio omnioculars!” The omnioculars Harry had used at last year’s Quidditch World Cup flew to Fred’s hand from the trunk on the floor.

“No, don’t!” Harry tried to be uninterested, but his voice was quivering slightly. “It’s... it’s rude.” But Fred was already gazing across the street through her window.

“Bloody rain,” he said. “I can’t seem to... oh, dear me! Harry? I think she’s a thief!”

“What?”

“She has something of yours,” said Fred again with a sing-songy voice. “Look George.” He handed George the omnioculars and turned to look at Harry; without thinking, Harry held his hand up to his ear, stroking the earring.

“Fred,” George asked, “should we go get that back for Harry?”

“Yes, I think we should.”

“Harry, be back in a flash, mate.”

“Nooooooo,” he hissed. Fred and George just stood there smiling. “Okay, okay, I know her, but you have to swear...”

“On our honor, mate,” said George as he held his hand over his chest. A moment later, he kicked Fred in the shin.

“Ouch! Er, yeah, on our honor!”

Harry told them of the last few weeks, leaving out various details he thought didn’t concern them; he ended with hitting his head on the steps below, and Mrs. Figg’s warning. “Swear again you won’t tell anybody. I mean anybody!” The twins were grinning from ear to ear, but nodded their assent.

“Still, Harry,” George spoke first, “there might be a connection. We could ask Dad for you, he’d know if...”

“Nobody can know! She’s a Muggle. I’ll never hear the end of it.” No sooner had the words slipped from his mouth than he wanted to put them back in again.

“Fine,” said George handing Fred the omnioculars, “we’ll keep it quiet. You have your bit of fun this summer, but promise at least to be careful?” Harry nodded.

“Harry?” Fred called, as he replaced the omnioculars in Harry’s trunk; he’d seen something and started to pull things out. “There’s glass all through here; you really should clean this up.”

“Wait!” Harry yelled, but it was too late.

“Reparo!”

Harry could hear Uncle Vernon let out a particularly loud snore, and then there was silence.

“Nothing to worry about,” said Fred pulling out an old square mirror. “Probably broke on your way home. Anyway, it’s as good as new.” He reached to hand it to Harry, but Harry stepped away. “What’s the matter?”

Harry’s face had turned ashen. He felt suddenly cold, very cold. Sirius had given him the two-way mirror to speak with him when he was at Hogwarts. Sirius kept the other. Harry had forgotten it until, until it was too late; if he’d remembered sooner, Sirius would still be alive. The film started to play in Harry’s mind once again. What he’d forgotten walking the streets with Gabriella, suddenly came flooding back... a flash of red light, a black veil, and Sirius... gone. Slowly, he took the mirror from Fred’s hand, wondering again if Sirius had the other mirror on him when he went through the black curtain. Harry had tried to use the mirror last spring, but when it failed he smashed it in his trunk.

He walked over to the window and looked out, lost in thought. Her room was dark... was she looking at him now? Water streaked down the window in sheets.

“Well, Fred, we’d better go,” said George standing up. “Harry, can we report that you’re okay then?” Harry simply nodded.

Fred walked to the center of the room and said, “And don’t move the bed again, okay?”

George added, "This does mean our plans for your birthday are ruined. Did you have a gift in mind?"

A gift? He placed his head against the side of the window and gazed out across the street. His eyes watched the water dripping like so many tears off the windowpane; the reflection of his scar looked back at him in the glass. "They'll never find it," a voice whispered in his head, but another fought back, "I've got to see."

When the twins had gone, Harry undressed and sat on his bed. His mind was racing and his heart beating in anticipation. "Occlumency," he thought. "I must get myself under control." He let out a deep breath. The day's exam left his head. The thoughts of hatred at the pool were swept away. I love you vanished into the ether. Bellatrix on the street evaporated into nothingness. The gift... the gift splintered into a thousand fragmented pieces and disintegrated into dust. Soon he was asleep.

In the days following, Harry and Gabriella had resolved to spend as much time as possible at the pool.

"We can't let them win, Harry," she would say defiantly. Her eyes would burn hot, and he could see a simmering anger ebbing just below the surface; somehow, he thought he understood. So, before Harry would go to work in the afternoons, they would be at the pool when it opened, and when Harry finished work, they would return until the gates were closed. Harry stopped reddening and began to get a pretty decent tan. Mr. Nellis, no longer asked to look into Gabriella's bag, indeed, he'd asked that they park in his reserved spot, so that he could keep an eye on her car while they swam.

Harry awoke on his birthday when the owl delivering the Daily Prophet arrived. He glanced at the headlines; more information on protective spells; a group of rogue Dementors had been caught and Arthur Weasley was receiving high praise for his excellent work; the Ministry was undergoing renovation to prevent further incursions. He tossed the paper aside, threw on yesterday's T-shirt and strolled downstairs. Uncle Vernon had already left for work; Aunt Petunia was putting away the dishes and there was no food in sight. Dudley was at the couch with his videogame machine, the sound of engines

racing roared throughout the house. Petunia cleared her voice in disapproval.

“Good of you to get out of bed sometime today,” she said, placing the last plate in the cupboard. “As you very well know, this is a special day.” Other than to tell him the date, she had never so much as mentioned his birthday before. “We will be leaving this afternoon for Dudder’s middle-weight boxing exhibition in South Benton; we will stay overnight, then after the tournament tomorrow, go to visit with Marge. We will be back on Friday evening, and when we return, I expect to see this house exactly as it is now.” She folded the dishtowel neatly and set it in the hamper. “You may have a mind to leave today, as you have done in the past,” she said, glaring at him intently, and then as if regretting the words said, “but it would be wise for you to stay.” She paused, and for a moment Harry saw something in her face she’d never shown him before... concern, but in an instant it was gone. “The front garden needs mowing, and I expect you to fertilize the flower beds. The inspection is in only two weeks, and I won’t have our family lose because of your interminable laziness.” She removed her apron, folded it, placed it in the closet, and then checked her hair in the mirror. “Come on, dear,” she said to Dudley, “it’s time we go meet the judges.”

“I’m not going,” Dudley said flatly. “Malcolm and Piers are coming over later; they’re going to help me on a few moves.”

“Oh, that Malcolm is such a sweet boy,” she said smiling. “Very well, give them my best.” She went to the door, straightened her dress, and stepped out into the morning air.

“Sweet as lemons,” Harry sighed, after the door was shut. And he sat down next to Dudley who handed him the other controller.

Dudley passed Harry’s car in the straightaway and said, “I haven’t seen Malcolm since you two had your little meeting at the pool.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know; he just keeps avoiding me--one lame excuse after another. Ernie thinks he’s afraid of you.”

“Me? I’ve never touched him.”

“You never touched Aunt Marge either.”

“Well, she had it coming.” Harry passed Dudley on the curve.

“Yeah,” Dudley sighed, “I suspect Malcolm did too.” He put down the controller and Harry passed him at the finish. Dudley walked over to the cupboard under the stairs, opened the door, looked inside and then said, “They used to make you sleep here.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I used to think it was funny; little Harry stuck in the cupboard.” Dudley slammed the cupboard door. “Harry gets his burger taken away because I’m still hungry. Harry at home while I go to the show.” Dudley moved to the window and leaned against the wall looking out. “I hope I get creamed tomorrow.”

“You won’t.”

Dudley looked back at him and smiled slyly. “You’re right,” he said, and then he turned and continued to stare out at the street. There was a long pause as Dudley churned something over in his mind. Harry just watched until finally, still facing the window, Dudley spoke with a slow, sorrowful voice. “Do you know what I saw when the Dementor had me?” Harry straightened; he wasn’t expecting this.

“I don’t know. But, I’ll bet it was worse than your worst nightmare.”

“They showed me... I saw... me,” whispered Dudley as he held his hand up to look at it just a few inches in front of his face. It cast a shadow with the morning sun onto the floor. “Well, what I am, or maybe what I’ll be.” He turned to look at Harry. “I won’t let them teach me to hate, Harry; I won’t hate others just because I hate it here. My happiest times are when I’m out of this dump at school, sound familiar?” He went to a bottom drawer in the kitchen and pulled it all the way out and set it on the floor. Then, reaching deep underneath, he pulled a small package out. He replaced the drawer and walked

over to Harry. "Here," he said tossing the package to Harry, "happy birthday."

Harry sat, stunned. The gift was heavy. He pulled the paper away to reveal a round stone, about the size of a snitch. It was a smoky blood red with flecks of gold glittering in the sunlight. It looked as if hot red embers had been trapped just beneath the surface. "Cool, but..."

"It made me think of the remember-ball you told me about," Dudley said, not getting the word quite right, but the effort made Harry smile. "Take it with you to Hogwarts and when you see it remember that I'm sorry I was such an ass for all these years. And if I forget when we're at home, use it to clonk me on the head so I remember good-an'-proper." He grabbed his Walkman and headed to the door. "I'm outta here."

"Dudley? Tonight, I'm not doing anything; maybe we could catch a show... together."

"I'm off to South Benton to smash some bloke's face in, remember?" He opened the door and looked back. "But thanks for asking." The door shut behind him.

Harry sat for a few minutes, admiring the gift that Dudley had given him; it was like no stone he'd ever seen before. Finally, he went upstairs, showered, put on clean shorts and a shirt and quickly walked over to Gabriella's, his hair as messy as ever. He was going to have to leave for work soon. Soseh answered the door.

"Ah! Harry, come in, come in." The boxes were now gone and their home had the warm look of being lived in. "Gabriella's out for the moment, she should be back any time. Are you hungry?"

"No thanks, I'm fine. I just..."

"Don't be silly. Come. Sit down and eat."

Harry had two plates before he took a seat in the Darbinyan living room. The room was a bit too warm and Harry started to nod; it had been another long night. He woke with a start to something moving

around his leg; at his ankle was beautiful white Persian cat. She was weaving her way in and around Harry's bare legs, leaving flicks of fur.

"I didn't know you had a cat," he called to the kitchen where Soseh was washing dishes.

"Gabriella has had Shara for years. She leaves fur everywhere she goes." Harry couldn't remember Gabriella ever mentioning her cat before. "I hear it's a special day today."

"What? No, not really, I have to work."

"Is it not your birthday?"

"Oh, that, well... yes; but I'm not much into birthdays really... bit overblown, if you ask me."

"Bit overblown? I think not! Birthdays should be vibrant celebrations, filled with laughter, filled with the memory of the parents that bore us, of the life we have been given, and thoughts of the years ahead we yet have to make a difference in this world!" She had stepped over to her front window and peered out looking for her daughter. "You have not made plans to celebrate, not even with Gabriella?"

"Well, no, not really, she's already given me a gift," he said holding his hand to his ear. Soseh smiled.

"An interesting gift, that; it holds two meanings I think, maybe more." She sat down across from Harry looking intently at him. "First, of course, is that both you and she wear them... a connection... a sign of love." Harry reddened. "Second, the earring matches your scar..." she paused, glancing at his forehead, "a sign of pain, I believe... great loss." Her face was soft and her smile gentle. He had been careful to cover his scar with his hair whenever he left the Dursleys; even now he knew it was covered by his fringe. Soseh had never before mentioned it, never asked about it, but now, her gaze was fixed upon Harry's forehead. "And still... I see another meaning..." Harry began to sit up; it was as if Snape were climbing into his brain. "Yes, someone else..."

The door burst open; Gabriella stood framed in a golden light. "Oh good, you're still here." She seemed out of breath, but was smiling as Harry stood up and gave her a kiss.

"Good morning," he said. "Where have you been off to?"

"Oh, nowhere really." She looked at her mother who was now crossing to the hallway. "Where's Papa?"

Soseh just shook her head. "He's out. Out again." There was a hint of anger mixed with worry as she disappeared down the hall. Harry wondered if Grigor's absence had been the source of their arguments.

Gabriella turned to Harry and asked, "Don't you need to be at work?"

"I have about fifteen minutes; more if you'll drive me," he said with the look of a lost puppy dog.

"YOU can drive yourself," she said slapping him on the shoulder, and then she held him tight. "I missed you."

"It hasn't even been eight hours," said Harry with a smile.

Soseh returned carrying a brightly wrapped package. "Happy birthday, Harry!" She handed him the gift. "Go ahead, open it now, but be careful."

Harry gingerly pulled the corners of the package open: a frame. Then he pulled the paper away; it was a painting. Standing on a beach, in front of a dazzling sunset, were Harry and Gabriella. They were looking into each other's eyes. She had one hand to his chest; his was to her face.

Gabriella shuddered, "Oh, Mama! You never told me. It's gorgeous." She was looking over Harry's shoulders, her hands around his waist.

"Yes," Harry said, "yes it is." But he wasn't thinking about the sea, or the brilliant colours of the sun. Soseh had captured her daughter perfectly--her hair, her eyes... Harry gazed at the gift for some time,

staring intently at the girl next to him in the painting, and then quite naturally turned and hugged Soseh. "Thank you, it's perfect."

On the way to work, Harry drove the car while Gabriella's conversation seemed to be sidestepping something she really wanted to say. Finally, as they were rounding the last block, she took in a little breath and said, "Harry, I know you don't think your birthday's a big deal and all, but I was wondering..."

"Yes."

"Well, I was wondering if maybe you and I could have dinner tonight with Duncan and Emma." Before he could answer she added, "Nothing big, just the four of us. They really want to wish you a happy birthday, and besides it's only fair to Duncan, you went to his, right?"

Harry grinned. "Right." She was so strong, so determined, and yet at times so uncertain. "Just the four of us?"

"Yes."

"Just dinner?"

"Yes."

"Okay." A great big grin burst across her face. "But not too long, we owe each other some quality time." He shut his eyes and yawned rubbing his face.

"Harry?" Her voice was again uncertain. "I saw... the other night, did you have..." she stopped herself and then hoisted a smile back on her face. "I'll see you tonight, then? Emma and I will drop by at six."

They kissed and she drove away. Had she seen Fred and George in his room? Perhaps Mrs. Figg? Or was it something else?

Duncan was already at work when Harry arrived. He waved and called, "Hey, mate! We've got a load of new stock in back to bring up. I've been clearing this area up all morning. We should fit most of it here; it's all winter stock. And today... today is payday!"

Harry spent the afternoon assembling racks for skis to be displayed, large down coats, gloves, and snowboards. It was hard to imagine they were getting ready for winter while the sun was still so warm. Unpacking ski gloves, Harry realized that in few short weeks he'd be heading back to school. What was he going to do?

"What if I just stayed," he thought. "Dumbledore said I'm safe as long as I'm at home." He could spend the rest of his life on Privet Drive together with Gabriella... but, of course, he couldn't. He wouldn't run from his future; his destiny was to destroy or be destroyed, but then, it didn't say it had to be this year, or even next. What if he didn't face Voldemort for fifty more years? "You're dreaming," he whispered to himself, tossing another pair of gloves into the bin.

It had been a hard day's work and six was fast approaching. He was just about to unload the last box of children's thermals when a familiar voice spoke over his shoulder.

"Skis? Skis already? I'm surprised you don't have holly hanging from the windows!" It was the same elderly man he'd seen in the store before. He was wearing bright green pants, a pink paisley silk shirt, and the same cap he'd worn before; in his hand was a box of golf balls he'd just purchased. "You've been working hard here, haven't you?" Harry shrugged his shoulders and nodded; he'd made a point of getting as many hours as he could to pay for Gabriella's tires with the money he earned himself. "Modest too," he let out in a little laugh. "Not many boys your age are willing to put in the effort anymore." The gentlemen glanced out the front store window, and said with an odd intonation, "Well, I think there's still time for a few more rounds in the sun before winter sets in; what do you say?" He set to go out the door, but just before leaving looked back at Harry and said with a smile, "You would have made your parents proud, son. You deserve a happy birthday." Harry just stared as the door shut behind the old man.

If Harry had his doubts that this man was a wizard, they were gone. Was he the one Dumbledore had sent to watch him? He'd met other witches and wizards in town before, not knowing it at the time, only later to find them shopping in Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley. He was

trying to decipher it in his mind, when Duncan called out, "Turn the sign around, mate. We're closed!"

Harry walked over and locked the front door, flipping the sign to read 'CLOSED' to those walking by. He glanced out the front window, but Emma and Gabriella weren't there yet.

"Listen, mate," Duncan said. "Here's your paycheck; we can get it cashed and you can make your last payment on the tires to Wes tonight."

"But the girls... I don't want Gabriella to know."

"Emma called about an hour ago; they're running way late. I told her we had enough work to do to keep us going till seven. That should give us plenty of time. We can take my car, but you'll have to drive," he said shrugging his shoulders. "I haven't passed the test yet."

Harry realized that he didn't have his wand and nightfall was approaching again. He didn't want to find himself on the street once more in the dark without it. "Can we stop by my place first," he asked. "I'd like to change before dinner."

"I don't think so, Harry. Wes only stays a little while to clean up after they close. In fact, we better get going right now!"

By the time they drove up to the tire shop, Harry was feeling a bit apprehensive as the sun began to cast long shadows in the street. Surprisingly, he found it hard to find a parking space. "I thought you said they closed at six?" he asked.

"Beats me, mate; maybe they had a tire sale today or something."

They walked to the front doors and Harry tried to see through the front window, but all was dark in the shop. Harry turned to leave. "They're closed up; he's already left for the day. I'm sure the doors are locked."

Duncan looked away as if he had something in his eye. "I don't know... give 'em a pull."

Harry pulled at the doors, and they swung open. There was a flash of light and an explosion of sound. Harry stepped back shielding his eyes, but Duncan grabbed his shoulders from behind and pushed him through the door. The time, at last, had come.

Chapter 7 - Eyes of the Dragon

“SURPRISE!”

The tire shop had somehow been morphed into a Brazilian scene from Mardis Gras. Helium balloons filled the ceiling and floated all about the shop. Dazzling streamers hung from the ceiling. Cardboard cutouts of palm trees stood next to two long tables of food, and behind them a large banner spanned the wall that read HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY! But, most striking of all, were the people. There were people everywhere! Everyone was wearing a swimsuit, or some sort of beach attire. Some had long strands of beads around their necks. The place was so packed Harry could hardly push his way in with Duncan's help. In the center of the room were three large punchbowls set inside white-walled tires. There stood Emma and Gabriella; anxious smiles hung on both their faces. Suddenly the room erupted in a chorus of “Happy Birthday to you....”

Harry began to make his way toward them shaking hands and greeting those he met on the way. He saw Wes, of course, and Tom who'd driven the tow-truck when Gabriella's tires were slashed, a lot of folks from work, some kids he and Gabriella had met on their long walks, and others he knew from his time at the pool. In fact, he suddenly realized, he knew all these people, some better than others, but he recognized every face. It had only been a few weeks, but it seemed he'd met half the kids in Little Whinging and they were all here to celebrate his birthday.

When he finally reached the girls, he looked at Emma first and gave her a hug. “Thanks, it's wonderful.” Then, he reached out his hands to Gabriella's. “Just the four of us, eh...nothing really big?” She was biting her lower lip. “In the car, I thought you were worried I'd say no. Is this the real reason?” She nodded, and his face split into an ear-to-ear grin. “You're brilliant you know?” He reached his hands to her face and they kissed. The uncertainty was washed away and a twinkle emerged.

“Yes, I know,” she said smiling and then looked to Emma. “But, with Emma's help, it wasn't very hard. Everyone we asked said they'd come. I don't think so much because you're a criminal,” she winked,

“but because they know you have a sensitive heart.” She held her hand to his chest. “There's live music! Some friends of Tom's have started a band.”

The party broke out of the sales area and into the back shop where three kids had set up to play. It made for much more room. Some of the crowd danced, others just talked, and everyone seemed to be having a great time. Harry cornered Wes where he could finally talk to him alone. “You didn't need to do this you know.”

“Didn't I? Have YOU ever said no to Gabriella?” he asked, raising his eyebrows at Harry. “No, I didn't think so.”

“Well, it's spectacular, thanks.” Harry handed Wes the money. “It's the last payment. This is still just between you and me, right? Well, besides Dunc.”

“Absolutely,” said Wes patting Harry on the shoulder, “and happy birthday.”

There was a tap on Harry's shoulder. It was Gabriella. “What are you two scheming about?”

Harry put his arm around her waist. “Just thanking Wes for the party, it's... it's...” and suddenly, looking around at the people smiling, enjoying each other's company, he lost the words. Here were kids from all walks of life and backgrounds. Like the balloons above the punch bowls, they were a rainbow of colours, and best of all, nobody noticed. They didn't notice if you were from the Middle East. They didn't notice if you were poor. They didn't notice whose hand you were holding. They didn't notice if you had a scar on your head, or if your parents had died. Here he wasn't a marked man, nobody was. This... this was everything that Voldemort hated. Dumbledore had spoken of the greatest power hidden in the Department of Mysteries. Tonight he felt it course through his veins and somehow he felt safer and stronger than he'd ever felt in his life.

“Harry?” a soft voice whispered in his ear. He turned to see Gabriella watching him. “Is everything okay?”

“Never better,” he whispered. “Shall we dance?”

It wasn't until well past midnight that things began to break up. The band had stopped some time ago, but Wes was still piping in tunes through the shop's sound system. The punch bowls were empty and the food was all but gone. Finally, all that remained were Gabriella, Duncan, Emma, Wes and himself. Harry, to his regret, had once again forgotten his promise to stay away from the punch. Fortunately, Gabriella had been declared the designated driver for the four friends earlier that evening. She, Emma and Duncan were collecting trash that had accumulated at the food table when Wes spoke up.

“Leave it,” he said. “We're doin' inventory tomorrow so the place is closed. I'll have time to take care of it in the mornin'.”

Gabriella looked at him and said, “You can't be serious? It's as if a tornado's been through here.”

He looked around. “Nah, it's not too bad,” he lied. “I'll leave the balloons and tell dad it's some sales idea. Harry, you want the banner?” He pointed at the sign across the wall.

“Wes, the banner's served its purpose on that wall tonight.” Harry was having some trouble holding his train of thought. “I think it's time to let it go. It's time to let it all go.” His eyes seemed somewhere else. “Emma took some pictures tonight; that'll be good enough.”

“Right then; well, you four best be goin', 'cuz I'm leavin'.” He flipped some switches. The music stopped, the lights went out in the back shop and he ushered them to the front door.

“Wes, do you need a ride?” Gabriella asked.

“Nah, I'm just around the corner. I could use the walk before I make it home.” He took a deep breath and turned out the last light, then locked the doors. “Good night. Happy birthday, Harry.”

“Thanks, Wes,” Harry replied, “we'll see you soon.” He was looking up at the stars, almost defiantly glaring at the bright red glimmer

above his head. Duncan and Emma were already headed to Gabriella's car, when she took his hand.

"It's not my father who's the only one with his head in the stars," she spoke gently. "Come on, let's get home, I have something I want to give you." Harry looked down to speak, but she simply touched his lips with hers and said, "Later."

The streets were empty on the ride home. They stopped in front of Duncan's house. The lights were out. He and Emma both stepped out of the car. "Well, mate, I've been in Little Whinging seventeen years, and that has got to be the best party this town has ever seen." He paused rolling over something in his mind and then said, "We need to talk, you and me. Sometime this week, okay?"

Harry looked puzzled. "Sure. This week." Duncan started for his front door, but Emma remained. Something was troubling her.

Gabriella spoke first. "What's the matter Em?"

"He puts on a good face, but he's upset, really upset. His parents didn't invite him to go to France; they just went. They didn't even mention his birthday. They travel all over the world, and leave him here to watch their precious plants." She looked at Harry. "You've kept him together this summer, Harry. He keeps saying that if Harry can do it with no parents, while being stuck with the Dursleys, he can do it too. But I don't know, he keeps talking about dropping school. I was thinking, maybe you and I could..."

"Emma!" Duncan called out from the door. "Are you and Gab going to keep yappin' all night or what?"

"I've got to go." Emma started towards the door and then looked back at the car. "Thanks, Harry, happy birthday."

Gabriella started toward Privet Drive, but neither of them spoke about Emma's words. Tonight, instead of stopping short and dropping Harry off, she pulled into her driveway. The Dursley car was gone and so was her father's. They got out of her sedan and she walked to the boot and took out a box. As she started to walk across the street

Gabriella looked at Harry with a grand smile and said, "Come on then."

For some reason Harry was uneasy. He looked up and down the street, but could see nothing in the darkness. He found himself a little light headed and cursed himself for drinking again. This wasn't how he would keep Gabriella safe. Instinctively, he reached for his back pocket, only to find it empty. "Damn," he hissed in a low voice.

Gabriella was already on his front porch. He hurried to meet her at the Dursley's front door, but when he turned his key in the lock, he found it already open. Gabriella noted the concern on his face.

"What is it, Harry?" she asked. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Just the, uh, door. It's unlocked. Dudley probably kept tight about me having a key so they left the door open is all." But in his mind he thought the Dursleys would sooner see him crawl through a window. Slowly he opened the door and turned on a light. Gabriella strode past him.

"Well, if there's someone in here let's find out." She looked back at him and smiled. "We have things to do." She set the box down on the coffee table.

Harry smiled and shut the door. He walked over to Gabriella and was about to give her a kiss when a large crash shattered the stillness of the Dursley home. It was from upstairs. Before his eyes, he saw her body tone suddenly change. He'd seen only a glimpse of it in the park that evening with Malcolm. She seemed almost catlike, her hands away from her waist, her back erect and her head slightly cocked as if to hear the slightest sound. She began to walk stealthily toward the stairs, but Harry stopped her.

"No. Let me," he whispered. She glanced at him and shook her head no, and then took another slow, quiet step forward. There was something almost frightening in the look of her eyes. She looked as if.... She took another step toward the stairs. "What are you doing?" he thought. But, there was no need to argue about who would climb

the stairs first. Whatever had made the noise was now making its way down the upper hall and heading their way. Harry motioned for her to step back and this time she obliged. No sooner had they taken positions at the bottom of the stairs, than a voice rang out breaking the tension.

“Bloody hell! When I get my hands on that... that idiot!”

“I’m not sure Harry’s the idiot, Fred.”

It was the Weasley twins, and a look of relief registered on Harry’s face as he wiped his brow. Gabriella saw this, but remained ready, her jaw tight.

“Fred? George? Is that you?” Harry called out. As the words left his mouth they appeared, each in their dragon skin jackets, at the top of the stairs.

“Hey mate!” called George as he stepped briskly down the stairs, but Fred wore a scowl on his face and was limping as he descended.

George shook Harry’s hand and said, “Happy birthday, Harry.”

Fred shook Harry’s hand too, and then burst out, “Did I tell you not to move the furniture in your room? Did I tell you that?”

Seeing Gabriella against the wall, George gave Fred a look to silence him and said, “Fred here accidentally, er, tripped over your trunk upstairs, Harry.”

“Oh no!” Harry gasped. “I was cleaning up this morning and moved it to the...oh, I’m so sorry Fred.” But he couldn’t help letting out a small laugh. Gabriella was completely flummoxed.

“Well,” Fred said, “happy birthday.” He limped over to the kitchen. “Is there anything to eat in this place?”

Suddenly Harry became quite uncomfortable. “Erm, Fred, George, this is Gabriella.”

George beamed. "Absolutely splendid to meet you. Harry's told us so much about you."

"Yes, all summer long," Fred chimed in, opening and closing cabinets. "Gabriella this, Gabriella that. Quite annoying really." He started opening drawers.

"Gabriella," said Harry ignoring him, "Fred and George are friends of mine from... from school."

Gabriella's face softened somewhat, but apprehension remained in her eyes. "A pleasure to meet you both," she spoke to George. "You're twins?"

"Yes." George looked at Harry smiling. "We get that bit about as much as you get...." And he nodded to Harry's scar. "So tell me Gabriella, do you like Harry here?"

Fred picked up on the pitch in his brother's words and added, "Yes, is he everything you knew he'd be?"

"Because we think he's fabulous."

"A number one kind of guy."

"First-class, mate."

"Yes, everyone thinks Harry's special."

"Not special in the this chap needs help sort of way."

"No, not like that."

"And not the sort that would go out with just any girl."

"Well, maybe most any girl."

"At least those girls that would speak with him."

"You do speak, don't you?"

Gabriella finally broke out in a smile. "Yes! Yes!" she finally called to get them to stop. "He is a first-class mate." She walked over to Harry and put her hands around his waist kissing him on the lips and he immediately turned scarlet.

"Well, brother," said Fred, "either she's lost her mind completely, or... nope, she's lost her mind completely."

George started for the door. "Well, Harry," he said, "we can't stay and chat like this all night."

"No. We've things to do, places to go, and... aha!" Fred found an apple in a low drawer beneath the oven.

"We just came to give you this." George handed him a small square package.

"It seems," Fred said chewing on his apple, "Kreacher had it hidden deep in his den. We don't think Sirius had it for some time." He held Harry's arm and his bright tone deepened. "No one believes he could have answered, even if you had remembered to use it."

"Fred," called George, "let's go."

"Yes, let's. And Harry, please leave your furniture alone. Otherwise you may find a surprise in your morning cereal."

"Goodbye, Gabriella," the two spoke simultaneously. "Harry's right about one thing, you are beautiful." They walked out the door closing it behind them. Harry heard a small snap.

Gabriella went to the front door to say goodbye properly, but when she opened it they were gone. She stood for a moment and looked up and down the street. Then, closing the door, she came back to the living room where Harry stood waiting to be bombarded with questions. In his hand was a square package wrapped in plain brown paper. She stood and looked at him for a moment. He couldn't tell what her face was saying. It was as if some inner machine were working away, deciding its next move, and then he saw in her black

eyes a sense of triumph and the twinkle was back. He felt utterly helpless.

“Well?” she said. “Let’s open it then, shall we?” They sat down at the coffee table next to the box she’d brought in. Harry grabbed the remote control and turned on the television. He changed the channels a few times and stumbled on to an old film.

“Don’t think I’ve seen this one,” he said trying to change the focus of the evening, but she was having none of it.

“Don’t be silly. What did Fred and George get you for your birthday?”

His hands began to tremble. He knew what it was. He didn’t need to open it. Still, he found his fingers reaching for the package. They slipped open the wrapping paper to reveal an old square mirror. Harry looked at it knowing its twin was now on his dresser upstairs. He handed it to Gabriella.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, turning it over in her hands. “Who’s Padfoot?”

“What?”

She handed him the mirror pointing to writing on the back. In black ink were the words

Padfoot,

I don’t think detentions will be quite as boring any more.

Prongs

“And Prongs?” she asked. “Do you know them?”

His heart skipped. It was his father’s writing. He’d never seen it before. It was much neater than his own; ‘Prongs’ was finished with a flourish. He sat there for a moment looking down at a bit of his father, tracing the curves of each letter with his finger....

“Harry?”

“What? Er, uh, no. I don’t know who that could be.”

“Really?” She was incredulous. “Perhaps one of your criminal friends?”

Harry thought how close she was to the truth, but simply smiled back and shook his head. Carefully, he set the mirror down on the coffee table next to the Gabriella’s box. He looked up at her and grinned taking it in his hands. “And this?”

“Well, it was for you,” she said crossing her arms and legs and sitting back, “but after the way the evening’s gone so far, I think I’ll take it back.” Then she gave him a look out of the corner of her eyes and a flash of sparkle appeared. Harry inched closer to her on the couch.

“Well,” he said, “it’s not a very big box is it?” He inched again. “I mean if it were a proper present, it would be...”

She shoved him on the shoulder, but he grabbed her hand pulling her close. “I love you when you’re angry,” he said, and they kissed.

After a bit, Gabriella broke the silence. “Go on then, open it up.”

He unwrapped the paper, and then carefully lifted the top of the box. Inside was a small statue, slightly larger than his hand. He pulled it out of the box. It was heavy, too heavy, really, for its size. His mind flashed to the Tri-Wizard tournament as he hovered around her and she reared her head and blew flame. It was as if the instant had been captured, frozen in time. Here in his hand was the head of a Hungarian Horntail. It was staring straight up, mouth open as if to breathe fire. Its gaping jaws filled with golden teeth. Its lizard-like skin was a matte black, and its eyes... its eyes, like a cat’s, glinted with the fire of burning embers.

The miniature head was mounted on a mahogany base to which was attached an engraved brass plate. The words read “Out of bravery, fire. Out of wisdom, blood. Out of love, true power.”

Harry was stunned. Every detail, every crevice and scale, the look of the eyes, the grimace of the mouth was exactly as he had remembered it. But how? It was impossible. Finally he breathed, "It's brilliant."

"Well," she started, "I saw that little dragon you have at your bedside table, and described it to Mama. She helped me make it."

"You made this yourself?" he gawked. "But it seems old, very old."

"Mama helped."

"You're incredible!" He gazed at the snapping dragon again. "And the words, what do the words mean?"

The smile on her face broadened. "It's a puzzle Harry, a riddle. I think you have all the pieces to put it together. If you truly are a brilliant criminal mastermind it shouldn't take long at all."

"I hate puzzles. How 'bout a hint?" He set the statue down next to the mirror.

"No."

"Not even for a kiss?" He put his arm around her.

"No." She laid her head on his shoulder holding him tight and sighed. "Harry, I don't want you to go."

The words deflated him instantly. They were running out of summer. In his heart, he didn't want to go, but he knew he would. With both arms he held her close. He could feel her breathing against his neck; he could feel the pulse of her heart next to his. The black-and-white film played quietly on the television. He was suddenly very, very tired.

"You really do have a sensitive heart," she whispered. The room was feeling warm. "I saw it tonight at the party... in your eyes." His eyes... his eyes were heavy. "Harry, the dragon... it will make you stronger." But, he was asleep. She lowered her head to his chest and closed her eyes. "Bravery... Wisdom... Love..." she whispered in cadence to

the rhythmic beat of Harry's pulse in her ear. "I saw them all in you tonight, Harry. Mama's never been wrong. If you are the one, the heart of the dragon will be yours."

Chapter 8 - Nowhere to Run

He woke the next morning to the sound of a motorcycle driving by. "Or was it a dream?" he thought. Slowly, he opened his eyes. The television was off and on the coffee table stood his mirror, and a black dragonhead. "Gabriella!" he called feebly, but she was gone. He righted himself and went upstairs to get ready.

The cool water of the shower began to bring him back to life. When he returned to his bedroom, he saw his trunk moved squarely to the middle of the room and smiled thinking of Fred, then pushed it back against the wall. Next to his bed was the statue of the dragon he'd received after the first task. "How could she remember the detail?" he thought. For a moment he held it in his hand, then set it back down and moved the trunk back into the corner. He'd dressed and was hopelessly combing his hair, looking at the small, square, silver mirror propped upright on his dresser, when he heard her come through the front door.

"Harry!" she called.

"Up here, Gabriella!" he yelled down.

Before his eyes, the mirror filled with smoke, then opened on to the living room below. In the frame was Gabriella standing by the sofa and looking up the stairs. Her hair hung over her shoulders and in her hand was a mug. She reached down to pick up his shirt which he'd left on the couch the night before.

"Sometimes I wonder," she whispered, folding his shirt in her hands and starting up the stairs.

Quickly he placed the mirror before him face down on his dresser and ran to the hall. "Up here," he called again, coming out to greet her. He stopped in the frame of his bedroom door when the morning owl arrived with the Daily Prophet. "Not now," he thought. He turned back, grabbed the paper, and quickly sent the owl on its way. Gabriella stepped into his room as he tucked the paper into his top drawer. He had just glimpsed the lead headline Dumbledore Announces

Changes at Hogwarts, when she walked into his room. The first owl was taking off, as she walked toward the window.

“More post?” she asked. Harry said nothing. “You’re right, I promised; no more questions.” She handed him the mug. “From Mama,” she said smiling. She was looking at Harry, her back toward the window, when he saw another owl flying toward his open window. She caught his eyes looking past her and turned just in time to see the owl fly in and land on her shoulder. She didn’t flinch, instead she said quite matter-of-factly, “Another letter?” taking the scroll from the bird.

“They’re not suppose to give you other people’s post,” Harry said. Gabriella handed him the envelope.

“I think he likes me,” she said stroking the bird’s feathers. Hedwig gave a hoot. “Are you jealous Hedwig? Don’t worry, I love you the most.” She gave both birds a treat and sent the other on its way. Then she took Hedwig out of her cage and started stroking her feathers sitting on Harry’s bed. Harry simply held the letter in his hands. “Well, is it a late birthday card?”

It wasn’t; it was clearly from Hogwarts. It had an H stamped in wax on the back. He knew she would notice that; she was feigning ignorance. He looked at the wax seal hesitating to open it, not because Gabriella was there, but because he knew what was in it... the end of summer. Finally, he opened the scroll. It was his class schedule, the list of books and supplies he’d need for the year, and two smaller scrolls of parchment. The first was a short note: “The Hogwarts Express will leave from Platform Nine and Three-quarters on the 1st of September at 11 a.m. sharp.”

“It’s my class list for the new year,” he sighed. “I’ve got to buy a lot before we leave from King’s Cross.”

“Well, if you’re free today,” she said brightly, “we can do a little shopping.” Looking down at the letter, he simply shook his head no. He rolled the scroll and slid it into his dresser.

"I have to work for a couple hours this afternoon. Just to finish up some stocking. I'll have to get these things later," he said. "Besides, there's a lot of special stuff I have to get from London."

"London? Oh, I haven't been there yet. I can take you! Shall we go tomorrow?"

Harry took another sip from the mug. "I'm hungry," he said. "I don't suppose your mum...?" Gabriella smiled, shaking her head.

"Let's go," she said. Harry took another sip and opened the second scroll. Looking at the words he began to tremble. "What's the matter?" she asked.

The last parchment was a new Hogsmeade permission slip. It read: "Due to recent events, all students above the second year must obtain signed permission to leave school grounds for any reason other than medical emergencies. This includes, of course, the Hogsmeade outings. Please return the bottom of the parchment with your parent or guardian's signature."

"Harry?" Gabriella asked again, "What's the matter?" Harry crumpled the parchment in his hand, squeezing until his fingers turned white, and threw it in the dustbin.

"No problem," he lied trying to bring himself to the present. "Just last night's activities I guess." He took a deep breath. "Let's go," he said with a weak smile.

They went downstairs, Harry in the lead, and he quickly stepped to the mirror and dragonhead that were on the table. The mirror simply looked like a mirror now. He laid it flat and walked back to Gabriella. "That's a wonderful gift, thanks." He kissed her. They stepped out the front door and started toward the street. The morning sun was bright in their faces. "I'm starving," he said the sun warming his spirits. He looked back at her with a grin on his face and stopped dead. His jaw fell to his chest, his eyes wide. Gabriella turned back to the house to see what he was looking at. There, in the driveway, was a motorcycle with a large red bow.

"I didn't see that when I came in!" she exclaimed.

It was gorgeous. The bike was black and chrome. It had low-rise handlebars and wire-laced wheels. On the black leather seat was a large note. The two of them stepped up to it and Harry removed the paper. It was from Hagrid

Harry,

I've heard you got your papers to drive. I figure this belongs to you now. Sirius would want it that way. They tell me the Dursleys are being nice to you this summer. I don't believe it for a second. If they give you a problem, let me know.

Happy Birthday,

Hagrid

Harry looked at Gabriella. "It's a present, from a friend."

"A friend? You're kidding, right? This is spectacular!"

"Well, it was my godfather's, see, and...." he couldn't finish. He began to tremble again. He touched the handlebars and then put his hand on the seat. Once, Sirius had sat here. Once, Hagrid carried Harry to Privet Drive in a basket while his mother and father lay murdered. Gabriella held him by the shoulders.

"I see your heart again, Harry." She took his hand and turned him around. "It was your godfather's?" He nodded, unable to speak. "And now it's yours?" Again, he nodded. He could feel the tears well up in his eyes, but he wasn't going to cry. "Then let's give it a try?" she said in matter-of-fact tone. "He wouldn't want you to have a bike you couldn't ride, would he?" Harry blinked.

"But I... I can't," he stammered. "I've never..." but then her words echoed in his ears.

“Don’t be silly,” she said simply. “If you need to ride, you’ll learn. I’ve been on a few motorbikes before, none as nice as this. It won’t be too difficult, but we need to get helmets first. Maybe today at work?”

Suddenly it seemed so obvious to Harry. Of course he could learn to ride a motorcycle. He worked in a sporting-goods store and had a teacher that lived right across the street. He suddenly had a vision of himself on the bike, flying through the air with Gabriella holding his waist. Well, maybe flying along the ground, for now anyway. His stomach gave a lurch. “Let’s eat,” he said, and the two walked across the street, saving the motorcycle for the afternoon.

When they walked in, Grigor and Soseh were seated in the living room. Soseh was reading a book and Grigor the paper. It had been some time since he’d seen Grigor in the house. Now that he thought of it, he hadn’t heard any arguments for ages. Still, Harry sensed tension in the air. Neither would look at the other. Perhaps it was just the stress of moving. When Soseh saw Harry, she stood up.

“Ah, Harry.” She stopped, and looked at him with concern. “You look pale? Are you ill?” she asked, and held her hand to the side of his face. For a moment, her eyes closed, but then she shook her head no, and slipped her hand away. “Perhaps you are just hungry. Your family is away for the weekend? You’ll starve! Come, sit down.” Harry thought that it didn’t much matter if Aunt Petunia was cooking or not, but an excuse for extra desert was worth holding on to.

He stuffed himself to overflowing and was ready to burst when Grigor closed his paper and stood up. Carefully, he folded it four times and tucked it next to the couch. He walked to the dining table and put his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Are you finished Harry?” Harry had a few more bites he was debating on, but something in the tone of Mr. Darbinyan’s voice said it was time to be done. Harry set his fork down.

“Yes, sir. Your wife is a wonderful cook.”

Grigor smiled. “She is wonderful at many things, Harry. At cooking, she is a goddess!”

Soseh glanced back to him from the kitchen, but did not smile.

Grigor looked back to Harry. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

"Sure." Harry stood up and followed Grigor to a study just off the stairs to the second floor. He'd never been in this room. In the center was a large wooden desk. It was covered in papers, some of which were in the midst of being graded. On the walls were pictures of galaxies and planets. All around were charts of stars and constellations. There were a number of small telescopes that seemed to be just for display and a small library of texts on astronomy, astrology and physics. Grigor motioned to a small leather chair next to the desk.

"Please sit," he said. Grigor sat down himself behind the desk, the faintest pleasantries of a smile on his face. "I understand you've been seeing a lot of my daughter?" he asked.

Instantly, Harry's heart began to race. "Yes, sir," he said.

"And, I understand that last night you stayed out quite late, yes?"

Harry hadn't been sure when Gabriella had left. She might not have been home till early in the morning. He stayed the course and said only, "Yes, sir."

"Gabriella is a very lonely girl, Harry. We have taken her away from her home, her friends, everything she has ever known. It was only natural that she should come to admire the first person in England that showed her kindness." Grigor spoke as if explaining planetary motion. Harry did not like where this was going. "You have known each other for only a few weeks, yes?" Harry nodded, but it had been more than a few.

Grigor continued, "In a few more weeks, I understand that you will be heading back to your school, a school that provides special rehabilitation."

Harry's heart sank. Grigor had heard of St Brutus's, but how? He was afraid for his daughter. He was thinking Harry wasn't good enough for her. His heart began to pound in his ears and every pore broke out in a cold mist.

"Perhaps it would be wise," Grigor said, as he stood adjusting the knob on one of his telescopes, "if you simply agreed to go your separate ways at that time." Harry couldn't stand it; he had to defend himself.

"But..." Harry sputtered. Grigor cut him off.

"My boy there are things about Gabriella you could never comprehend." His voice was raised. He straightened a stack of papers on his desk, and sighed. "It is possible that when you return next summer you will find your lives still aligned. It would be wise to give Gabriella the time and space she needs to make such a decision." Harry sat, unable to speak. What was he supposed to do, just forget that she ever existed? Grigor, held open his hand to escort Harry to the door. His knees felt weak, but he stood and walked across the room. Just before he came to the door, Grigor held out his hand to shake Harry's, but instead of holding his hand he reached to his forearm. Harry did likewise. Locked in this foreign handshake Grigor, his eyes stern, finished with, "Harry, this was a conversation between men. Please keep it that way." Harry nodded, they shook, and Harry walked out. As the door shut behind him, his head began to spin.

He looked about, but Gabriella had gone. Soseh was at the kitchen sink still doing dishes. Harry had to look twice. She was working that same pan when he'd left the room. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her shirt, but would not look toward Harry. What was he to do, just leave? His head was light and the floor beneath his feet seemed to be giving way when he heard Gabriella's voice.

"Are you two done?" she said brightly. "We'd better hurry; you'll be late for work." She had no clue. No sense of what had just been said.

"Yeah," Harry said, "we'd better get going." He felt pale and shaky.

“Are you okay?” She stepped to his side and whispered in his ear, “Remember this next time you decide to have an extra cup of Duncan’s punch.” She pinched him on the side and grinned. “Let’s go, I’ll drive and you can rest. Bye Mama!” There was no answer. As Harry went out the door, Soseh was still washing the same pan.

In the car, Harry was numb. Gabriella was jubilant explaining the various aspects of riding a motorcycle. By the time they arrived at the shop, all Harry wanted to do was climb in to bed and never wake up. He kissed her goodbye and they made plans to meet mid-afternoon to start practicing on the motorcycle.

Inside the shop Duncan was busy with a customer. Harry went over to the winter goods and began to finish what he’d started the day before. It was tedious, monotonous work un-boxing merchandise and placing it on the appropriate shelves. His mind raced. He could count on one hand the number of times he’d spoken to her father. He didn’t know Harry at all. Did he think he was a street bum? Some gloves made their way onto the shelf for scarves. It was a lie. Harry could prove it! He could take care of Gabriella better than any.... He crumpled to the floor, his face in his hands. It wasn’t a lie. It was true. How could he ever take care of Gabriella? How could he ever grow to spend the rest of his life with her? Harry was a wizard, and she was a Muggle. He grabbed a ski hat and wiped his face. And if he did bring her into his life, what then? There was a very real possibility that Harry wouldn’t live to see the next year. He’d never know if their lives were still aligned or not. He couldn’t put her at risk of death. What if Voldemort found out? Harry stood up and began walking to the back of the store; he was feeling sick.

“Hey, mate, hold on, I haven’t opened ‘em up yet.” Duncan ran towards Harry holding a set of keys. They got to the men’s room and he unlocked the door. “Bit too much last night, eh?” he said, patting Harry on the shoulder. Harry just nodded and went inside. Duncan followed. What he needed was air and this wasn’t it. He tried to splash water on his face, but it just made him wet and miserable.

“Give it some time, Harry. We’re pretty slow today, if you want to take off.” Harry just shook his head. He couldn’t bear the thought of heading home to Privet Drive, not now. “Suit yourself.” Duncan

leaned against the paper towels. "Harry, I've been thinkin'. You're as bright as they come. I'm guessin' you could run this place if you wanted to." There was a long pause as Duncan grabbed some paper towels and shot baskets into the trash. "I hate this hell hole. But you knew that, Harry, didn't you." Another shot made the mark. "I need to get out of Little Whinging. I need... I need to be rid of my folks." His last shot missed wide and he leaned back against the towels again. "Mr. Fettle's wantin' to set up another shop in South Benton. Says I could run it if I wanted to. Emma's been begging me to get out of Little Whinging. She's been talkin' to the coaches at the University and might even get a track scholarship there." He paced to the door. "Well, I was thinkin'... I was thinkin' what I need is a partner. Someone I can trust to run the place when I'm not there. I was thinkin' maybe you could cut out of St. Brutus's, or wherever it is they make you go, and give it a try with me." Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Duncan held up his hand.

"Now I know you're in no state of mind to be makin' a big decision like this. I just want to let you know I'm thinkin' about it, that's all. The money'll be ten times better mate. You'll be able to have your own place, and buy your own car to drive Gabriella around in." Duncan opened the door. "Look, mate, take as long as you need in here. If you want to work, work, and if you need to go, go. We can talk more about business later, there's plenty of time." He left Harry, alone, staring at the door, as it swung shut.

Harry chose to work. He needed the time to think, to set his mind straight, but the direction his mind was headed started to twist off the tracks. He wasn't poor. He had a vault full of galleons at Gringotts, but he knew that wouldn't last him his whole life--certainly not if he was to have a family. The thought of leaving the Wizarding world was emblazoned in his mind. He'd leave the rest to sort out Voldemort. He'd have a well-paying, respectable job and Mr. Darbinyan would see that Harry was good enough for his daughter. She'd graduate next year and come to live with Harry in South Benton. It seemed so simple, really. He'd made friends in Little Whinging; he could do it again. Besides, his mind flashed red, they don't think I'm capable of handling the fight anyway. They've got Ron and Hermione out there. They don't think they need Harry, but they'll see! "They'll see!" he yelled out loud. A few customers turned to look. His mind was on fire.

By the time Gabriella walked into the store, his decision had been made. He would spend the rest of his life with her, and leave the Wizarding world behind.

She was with Duncan laughing about something when he came up to her. "Hi Harry!" she said. He put his hands to her face, drew her close, and kissed her.

"I love you," he said. "You know that don't you?"

"Of course," her voice skipped, "why?" He had a look about him she'd never seen before. She knew something was wrong and it wasn't last night's party.

"And you... you said you didn't want me to leave, right?"

"I did, Harry, but..."

"Well, that's it then," he continued, "isn't it?" He was looking out the window nodding his head up and down as if coming to agreement with an imaginary person.

Duncan took him by the shoulders. "Come on, mate, let Gabriella get you home. You need to rest. Remember what I said, there's plenty of time, so take it." Harry spun on Duncan.

"No! There's no time." His eyes were wide. "Helmets! Gabriella, we need to get helmets!" He ran to the back of the store. Moments later he returned with two helmets and a wild smile on his face. "I love sporting goods, don't you?"

On their way home Harry was silent, but alert. His eyes fixed ahead, unblinking. Gabriella was worried. In his mind, he was putting it all together. How would he get rid of his things... his magical things? Hagrid might take them. He could just trash the lot. He really didn't have any family left, and certainly there wasn't anybody who gave a damn about what he was up to. He'd keep the motorcycle though; he could use that to get around town. He could get Bill to cash out his Gringotts account and have it exchanged for pounds. With Fred and George opening another store in Hogsmeade, they were bound to

stay successful; they could keep sending him the occasional dividend. He had more than enough to get a place to stay and with the money from the new job he could keep up the rent, buy food, do whatever he wanted. "Yes, yes, that's it," he muttered to himself.

He was smiling as they pulled into Gabriella's driveway, but it was an unnatural smile.

"Harry," she said, "I think you should lie down for awhile."

He looked at her as if she were mad. "Are you kidding? There's no time! You said you'd teach me how to ride the bike. Let's do it!" He was possessed, and would not be deterred, so Gabriella, growing more concerned with each passing minute, agreed. By the time the sun began to set, Harry had become as good, if not better, on the motorcycle than she.

"Just like riding a Firebolt," he whispered. His thoughts turned to flying, but he squashed them like a flobberworm under his foot. He refused to stop to eat, or drink despite Gabriella's pleadings. If Harry wasn't exhausted, she was.

"Come on Harry, it's time to go home."

"Yes, yes," he said, "there's a lot to be done. I've got to finish before they get back."

"Before who gets back? The Dursleys? What do you have to finish?" Gabriella was desperate. She didn't know what was going on, but Harry remained silent, flipping the visor on his helmet down and heading off to Privet Drive with her holding him tight around the waist.

He was traveling too fast when they passed through a red light near the park. On the opposite corner was a police car. Immediately its lights went on and it pulled out behind Harry.

"Harry," Gabriella called out in the rushing wind, "pull over. You ran a red light." Harry shook his head and sped up. The siren began to blare. "Harry, slow down, you're going too fast!" But he wouldn't listen; he didn't have time to stop and talk to policemen. They'd want

to know things: things Harry didn't have time to tell them. He turned left onto the street where Duncan lived, but he couldn't hold it. The bike began to give way beneath him.

It all happened in slow motion. He could hear Gabriella scream, hold tight to his waist and then slip away. His body flew in the air toward the sidewalk. Sparks flashed as his bike scraped the pavement. The right side of his body slid along stones. He bounced hard against the sidewalk and rolled onto the grass. The bike hit the curb and leapt into the air, over his head, landing against some bushes. He heard the screech of brakes, the silencing of the siren. "Gabriella?" he thought. "Where's Gabriella?" Fighting the pain, he forced himself to one knee and saw her face-down on the pavement. The new white helmet he had bought hours before was scraped black. He took off his own helmet, stood up and stepped toward her. His right side wanted to buckle, but he refused. She needed his help. One step. "Please be okay." Two steps. "Move, just move!" Three steps. "I didn't. I couldn't have."

He was upon her lifeless body when a car door slammed. There was a clicking sound across the street. He heard a voice, distant at first, and then clear and strong. "... I said, move away from her, boy!" It was the policeman. He was walking straight at them with a baton in his hand. "Step away!"

It didn't make sense. Harry's head burst with pain. He had to protect her. He felt rage like he'd never felt before. He knew he had no wand, but his soul was on fire. Instinctively, he raised his right arm and from somewhere deep inside, a place Harry had never been before, he cried out, "NOOOO!" Red light erupted from his arm and through his hand. It hit the policeman squarely in the chest lifting him off the ground, and smashing him against a van parked across the street. The officer dropped to the ground in a heap.

Harry ignored him and turned to Gabriella's body. Slowly, he turned her over. "Gabriella, come on baby, wake up." He stroked her arm. He lifted the visor on her helmet and looked upon her face. "Please baby, we're safe now." There was nothing. "We're going to South Benton with Duncan, you and me." Tears were falling down his face. "I've got it all planned. Next summer, we'll watch the sunset on the

Mediterranean, I swear.” He held her tight and closed his eyes. “Please... please Gabriella, wake up.” Suddenly, he heard voices. A woman across the street screamed. His head began to spin, but it became crystal clear what he must do next. He kissed her cold hand, his own trembling, and whispered, “I’ve got to go baby. I’ll be with you soon.” He stood up and limped unsteadily toward the motorcycle. The engine was still running. Wincing, he pulled his leg over the seat, and sped away.

Chapter 9 - An Uncertain Future

Harry rode the motorcycle through the Dursley's maturing flower garden, shredded blossoms flying everywhere. The wheels ripped across the front lawn, gauging it with deep ruts. He hid the bike along the north side of the Dursley home, scraping the paint on their siding for nearly nine feet. For an instant he looked at the bent metal and scraped paint, then ran to the front door. Trying to focus his blurring vision across the street, he saw the lights were on downstairs. But tonight, there would be no candle flickering in the window above.

"I'm sorry," he whispered and wiped his face with his blood stained hand. He burst through the front door.

"What to take?" he thought. He was halfway up the stairs when he remembered her gift. He ran into the living room, sweeping up both the mirror and the dragonhead into his left arm; his right arm was useless. Everything seemed to be spinning. He would put everything in his trunk, and... and... he stopped. "No," he whispered. "All I need is my wand." He laid the mirror on the dresser with its twin. Next to these he put the dragonhead. On a piece of parchment he scribbled as best he could, "Soseh, I'm sorry." Blood dripped onto the parchment and spread like an expanding cloud as he set it under Gabriella's gift.

Harry turned to Hedwig's cage. "Hedwig," he said, "I'm setting you free." He took her to the window, held her with his one good arm, and stroked her feathers. "If you want, fly to Hermione. She loves you almost as much as me." He thrust her out the window, but she flew back in. "I said fly away you bloody bird!" She stood there on the windowsill, then flew back to her cage. "You'll figure it out soon enough when Vernon tries to roast you!" He kneeled down to his trunk, pulled out his wand, and slipped it into his pocket. "I need to find him, and get this over with. That shouldn't be hard at all. I'll just let him know I'm available. Malfoy's mother will know how to contact him." Nearly losing his balance, he stood to leave.

"Goodbye girl," he said to Hedwig. "I'm off to see how the bike flies." He was headed to the door when he stopped to look at the room one last time. He still had some chocolate frogs under those loose

floorboards. "Childish," he thought. No sooner had he turned to go than an owl flew in through the window with a scroll. Harry came to the open frame and yelled out to the wind, "I'm not staying! I don't care what you say!" Again he made his way to the door. This time there was a burst of flame, a phoenix feather, and a howler. "There won't be anybody left to hear it," he said defiantly and proceeded down the hall. But when the howler spoke, he stopped to listen. There was no yelling, as Harry had expected, but a loud and commanding voice, a voice Harry knew well-- Dumbledore's.

"Stay where you are...;"

"Typical," Harry thought and he turned to leave.

"... she is still alive."

He stopped cold. "Alive?" Panicked, he ran to his room. "Where is it? Where is it?" he yelled. On the floor was the envelope he'd turned his back on. He tore open the letter.

Harry,

An associate of mine has handled things on the street. Your friend is fine. Please, stay where you are. I will see you at first light.

Mr. Weasley

Harry stood for a moment, holding the note, reading and re-reading it. It began to tremble in his hands. Soon his entire body was shaking. The night was warm, but he felt terribly cold. He took the covers off his bed and wrapped them around him. He went over to his window and stared across the street. Her curtains were drawn shut, and the lights downstairs were off. "How could she be alive?" he thought. His mind was spinning too quickly to put anything together. He sat by his window and continued to stare at the window across from his. As his vision failed, the street seemed to fill with fog; everything was turning gray. He was still shivering when he noted that the night was growing lighter, the first signs of a new day. Finally, exhaustion overwhelmed him, and all was darkness.

It was just a few hours later when he woke to a hand on his shoulder. The sun was just lifting over the Darbinyan home. He opened his eyes, and for a moment the sun's rays blinded him.

"Harry, are you okay?" It was Mr. Weasley; his voice kind and gentle. "Come over here, and lie down." He lifted Harry to his feet and moved him carefully toward the bed. Harry's eyes couldn't seem to focus on anything. He grabbed Mr. Weasley's shirt.

"Gabriella, she's okay? Your scroll, you said..."

"Gabriella's fine she..."

"Where? Where is she?"

"You've been watching her all night. She's in her bed resting. I think she'll wake up late today, but when she does she won't have a scratch." He began to take the cover from around Harry, and let out a small gasp. "Which is more than I can say for you. Merlin! What happened to you?"

Harry looked at himself for the first time in the mirror. What he saw, he couldn't recognize. The right side of his face was swollen black and blue. Blood still trickled from his right ear soaking his shirt in a clotted mess. He had to peel the bedcover away from his right arm. It had been scraped raw, or was it burned? It looked like it had been through a sausage grinder, and it was still oozing.

"I've got to see her," Harry said. He began to limp to the door. Mr. Weasley stopped him.

"No. No you don't." He was clearly agitated. "They said you were fine; that you ran in here with no problems. I thought... Harry, tell me you won't move." Harry flashed his eyes out the window. "She's fine, Harry. She won't be awake for hours. Please, swear to me." Harry nodded, and sat down on his bed. He was starting to realize he couldn't see well at all, and that the pain of his arm was nothing compared to the throbbing of his head.

"And... and the police officer? Did I..."

"He's fine. Everyone's fine, but you!" Mr. Weasley straightened his shirt and took a deep breath. "Options..." he muttered to himself. "I need options. Okay, I'll have them connect the floo, and I'll get a portkey. Damn the paperwork! We'll use whichever works first. Don't worry, Harry. We're going to get you taken care of right now. Please, stay here!" With a snap, he disappeared.

Harry put his head to his pillow; it pounded. The room was starting to spin. What had happened last night? He was certain she was dead, but he hadn't had time. And what about the policeman? He looked at his arm. Small droplets of clear liquid fell to his bed. Wincing, he squeezed his fingers to prove to himself that it still worked. "But how?" he whispered into the air. His breathing was becoming labored. "I... I saw green?" he rasped, unsure what was real, what was dream; everything was spinning.

A few moments later Mr. Weasley was back; in his hands was a box. "Harry," he said, "where's your wand?" Harry still had it in his pocket.

"I have it," he wheezed, now finding it hard to breathe.

"Okay, then," Mr. Weasley spoke, "let's get up." As Harry lifted his head off the pillow a sharp pain struck him on his right side. He groaned. "We'll never make it downstairs." Mr. Weasley opened the box to reveal a small golden sphere. "It's a portkey, Harry. A bit rougher ride than floo, but we need to go immediately. You know what to do?" Harry nodded. "On three then? One, two, three." Harry's navel was grabbed from behind and a wave of searing pain shot through his body. Traveling by portkey was disorienting at the best of times, but now Harry's head was splitting.

When they stopped, Harry fell to the ground, his face hitting the floor. "Black marble," he thought, trying to draw a breath that wouldn't come. "This must be..." But in that instant his vision failed, and all went dark.

The air was cold and crisp. It was suddenly much easier to breathe, although his head still throbbed. All was dark, very dark, except for the stars. They were everywhere. "So many colours," Harry thought. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that he was standing in a garden. There

was a rustling in the bushes. Suddenly a gnome popped his head out, then disappeared. From behind, Harry heard screaming. He turned and the scene changed. He was in the street next to Duncan's house. No, he was in Duncan's house looking through the front window. On the street, a police car's lights flashed as a policeman started to get out.

"Oh no, Duncan!" a woman's voice gasped. "I think the one on the ground is dead." It was Emma, or someone like Emma, standing on the front porch and holding Duncan tightly by the arm.

"Did yeh see the bike flip over that guy's head?" Duncan replied. "He was almost flattened!"

"What... what's he doing?" Emma asked. Harry seemed to float, watching himself reach down and turn Gabriella's lifeless body over. There was a blinding green flash. "It can't be!" the woman's voice cried out, twisting into...

The garden returned, and the sound of crickets filled the air. But the air was colder now, much colder. He began to shiver when he heard a faint hissing sound.

He woke as the door to his room squeaked open, pushing the hiss to the back of his memory. He heard footsteps walking close. He was in bed, the linens pulled up to his chest. He kept his eyes shut. "Is this still a dream?" he thought.

"Well he's looking much better, isn't he?" It was Hermione's voice.

"Lots," Ron's voice mumbled. He was eating something. "I don't think he'll miss one of these, do you? I mean he's got so many, anyway."

"Ron, you're hopeless," Hermione chided. "Well, we should go. They said it might be a few more days before he wakes up."

"A few more days!" Harry sat up, the room began to spin, and he put his head back down again. "How long have I been out?"

“Harry! You’re awake!” Hermione ran to his bed and touched the right side of his face. Her own face looked red and swollen, as though she’d been crying. “They weren’t sure you’d...” she shuddered.

“Hey mate,” Ron chimed. “You’ve got a story to tell if you ask me.”

“HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN OUT!” he demanded. His two friends each took a step back.

“Well,” Hermione said, “three days, if you count the day you arrived and not today. It’s Monday.” Harry surveyed the room. He was definitely in St. Mungo’s. On the walls were paintings, their characters moving to see who was yelling. Across from his bed was an open window through which he could see an azure blue sky.

“What time is it?” he asked, trying to calm himself.

“Almost noon, mate,” Ron answered. “Lunch will be by pretty soon... I hope.”

“I need to go.” Harry turned out onto the floor, holding the bed to steady himself. His right arm, which was wrapped in gauze, ached, and his head was pounding. He began to sway. His two friends quickly grabbed either side.

“Come on Harry,” Ron said. “You’ve got to lay down, you’re brain’s been scrambled.”

“My brain’s fine!” Harry pushed Ron away. He didn’t want to be here. He had chosen to leave this world behind. He certainly didn’t want to see these two. “How was vacation?” he sneered. He could see immediately by their reactions that they had lied. “Off to the war without Harry, were we?” He stood and tore his arm from Hermione, but winced at the pain. “Well you can keep your bloody war! I WANT OUT!” He started for the door, and then realized he had nothing on but a hospital gown. Without looking back he said through gritted teeth, “Where are my clothes.” Each word landed with a thud.

“Oh Harry,” said Hermione, her voice quivering. “They were torn and covered in blood. We were going to bring you new ones. When you got better.” Her voice was thin and weak.

“Come on Harry,” Ron pleaded. “Sit back down, and we’ll get you some clothes right now. Come on, mate.”

“I’m leaving,” Harry replied, “with clothes, or without.” But no sooner had he turned to the door, than it swung open in front of him. It was Mr. Weasley, but no smile appeared on his face. Standing inches away, Harry realized that the lines in his face had been cut somewhat deeper than he remembered. His eyes, once so carefree, were steely.

Mr. Weasley looked around the room. “Ron, Hermione, I need to speak with Harry alone,” he said curtly. They both made to leave. Harry was determined not to look at them, but then Hermione touched his arm.

“I like your hair,” she smiled, and left the two of them to talk in private.

Harry’s heart felt a pang of guilt, and his shoulders slumped a bit. Mr. Weasley still stood looking at him straight on. “Your friend is fine Harry. I’ve had someone by every day. You, lad, had it much worse. We almost lost you. The healers finally stopped your brain from swelling, but they want you to stay here for a while longer. They said the bandages on your arm will have to stay for at least a week. When you’re healed, you can do whatever you want.” He spoke these last words with added emphasis. “Please, lad, back to bed.” This time Harry obliged. His mind was still foggy and he could feel his legs starting to give way. But, if Gabriella were okay, he would sort things out here.

“Mr. Weasley, the policeman, he’s alive?” he said, pulling the linens back over his chest.

“Yes, he’s fine Harry. It seems he was hit with a rather severe stunning spell. Still, his bruises were easily healed, and all he’ll remember is that he fell asleep in his car at the park. The neighbors who came out to look at the commotion have all been altered to remember nothing. Your motorcycle is safe, and a note has been left

with the Dursleys that you're at the hospital." There was a large look of distress on his face. "Harry, you didn't have your wand with you at the accident?"

Harry looked at his bandaged hand. "No," he replied.

"Did you see anything, anyone, that might have cast a stunning spell?"

"They don't know," Harry thought. He considered explaining, but the idea quickly left his mind. "No," he said simply.

"We think someone was there Harry, but how, we don't know. It's possible they tried to attack the policeman first, so they could turn on you. The area's been monitored closely for signs of magic all summer. That stunning spell tripped all kinds of alarms. Our people were at the scene in seconds; one saw you ride off." Mr. Weasley walked to the window and let out a deep breath. "But we have you back now, don't we." He walked over to Harry and tried to hoist a smile on his face. "What is it Harry?"

"You don't have me. You don't have me at all." Harry's eyes were fixed on the ceiling above. "When I leave here, I'm never coming back."

"I understand," said Mr. Weasley his voice once again calm and gentle. He took a seat next to Harry's bed. "And where will you be going?"

"I think you know, sir." Harry's insides were churning. "I'm done. I quit." He rolled turning his back to the guest beside his bed. "You won't have to worry about Harry Potter getting in the way. Let Ron and Hermione, and all the rest keep fighting the battles. They seem to have done fine this summer. All in one piece still."

"Is that what you think they've been doing all summer?" The chair slid closer to Harry's bed. "And you've been stuck at the Dursley's again. But we thought you were getting along much better now? Were we wrong?"

Harry wanted to bury his head in his pillow, but instead turned to look at Mr. Weasley. His eyes had brightened, and his smile had smoothed the creases on his face. Harry searched for the words. "It's just that... Gabriella... she... I..." Suddenly a dawning comprehension appeared across Mr. Weasley's face. His eyes began to shine.

"Do you think you're the first young wizard who has fallen for a Muggle before?" Harry said nothing. "You know, of course, Seamus?" Harry's mind flashed to his classmate at Hogwarts whose mother was a witch, but father was a Muggle. Suddenly he wanted to know how. He couldn't believe he'd never asked. His head fell to the pillow again.

"The thing is," said Harry, "her father, he hates me, he thinks..."

Again Mr. Weasley interrupted. "I recall a young woman named Lily whose father refused to let her see the man of her dreams. I believe his name was James," he smiled.

"My father...?"

"Your father and your mother's father never saw eye-to-eye. James was a bit too much flash. Still, your father was very persistent, and in the end.... Well we know what happened." Mr. Weasley rubbed his hands to his face. He was tired. "Harry, there are ways to do this. Ways to do this right. Don't be rash, and don't be foolish. You'll see, just give it time." He stood up and stretched. "Molly will be by later to say hello." He stepped toward the door. "And for the record, you've been doing a bit more magic than those two combined." He pointed out the door. "That mirror trick." He shook his head. "I don't know how you do it." He walked back to Harry's bed and held his left hand. "Son, if you're in love with a wonderful girl who loves you back, let that be enough for now. The rest will come soon enough." Mr. Weasley straightened up and put a smile on his face. A moment later, he'd left the room. Outside, Harry could hear him raise his voice telling his friends to wait, to give Harry some time.

"I don't know how I do it either," Harry whispered to the ceiling. He was trying to sort things out properly, when he realized he forgot to ask what Gabriella knew. She was okay, but had they wiped her mind

too? How much? Suddenly, Harry had visions of returning to Privet Drive as a stranger to Gabriella. "What if she doesn't recognize me?" he thought.

The flapping of wings filled the silent room. Perched on the window was Harry's snowy owl. "Hedwig!" he called. "What are you doing here?" She flew to his bed, a letter tied to her leg. It was a regular white Muggle envelope, and on the front was the name "HARRY" spelled out in large handwritten script. He slipped open the letter to reveal two things: a plastic card with his picture on it, and a light-yellow paper resembling his own parchment from home. His heart skipped. It was from Gabriella.

Harry,

I feel so foolish trying this. If Hedwig comes back with this same letter tied to her leg, I'll just die. Dudley's home alone, and has let me into the house. He says you're okay, but in the hospital. He won't say where. Your Aunt came home Sunday night and saw the garden torn to shreds. She screamed for fifteen minutes until they finally pulled her into the house. Your provisional license came in the mail today, now you can crash legally, well sort of. I guess you won't have me to keep an eye on you. All I remember is the accident, and waking up in my bed. How did you get me home?

I'm worried about you Harry. You were possessed that night. It wasn't like you. Please write and tell me you're okay. Everyone's asking about you. Mama keeps telling me not to worry, that you're fine. She's never been wrong before, but my heart hurts. I miss you dearly. You said you didn't have time, Harry, but you do. I'll give you all the time in the world.

I love you,

Gabriella

Much as he'd done with his father's mirror, he traced her handwriting with his fingertips, trying to feel her breath on the paper. Was she sitting on his bed when she wrote this? Was the sun red over Little Whinging? He thought of what Mr. Weasley had said. Was love

enough for now? Only Harry and Dumbledore knew the prophecy. If Mr. Weasley had known, would he still think that love was enough? "The rest will come, alright," Harry thought, "and I can't put her in any more danger." He had to write back, but how? "Ron!" he called out. "Ron!" Ron burst through the door with his wand at his side looking for trouble, Hermione one step behind.

"What, Harry? What is it?" Looking at Ron there, ready to defend him, wand set to strike, Harry began to laugh. Sheepishly, Ron lowered his hand and put the wand away.

"A lot of attacks here at St. Mungo's are there?" Harry jibed.

Ron smiled back. "Well, it could have been a Devil's Snare, right? You wouldn't be the first, mate."

Harry sat up in bed. "Listen, both of you, I'm sorry for being such an arse a minute ago. I'm really glad you're both here, and I promise to tell you everything soon." He paused. "But right now I need some paper. I've got to write a letter."

Hermione stepped forward opening a book and pulling out a loose sheet of parchment. "Here Harry, you can use this. And here's a quill."

"Who's the letter for?" asked Ron.

Harry looked up. "Honestly, you two have been really fantastic. But what I need right now is some peace and quiet."

Ron looked at Hermione. "I think we've just been given the old heave-ho wouldn't you say?"

"I think you're right, Hermione. Harry, do you think we could join you for lunch?" Harry nodded and the two left the room.

For a while he stroked Hedwig's feathers thinking about the summer. His mind slipped back to the events of the last year. He thought of Cho and the Valentine's Day fiasco. He felt much older now, perhaps too old really. He remembered Sirius and Cedric, and thought hard

about how they died. He would not feel sorry for himself. He would not deny his destiny. And he would not deny his love for Gabriella. He began to write.

Gabriella, my love...

I'm so sorry, forgive me. I never meant to hurt you. I've let you down. I've let you all down. My own selfish desires put you in danger. It will never happen again.

I'd give everything to have you in my arms, right now... to look into your eyes and stroke your hair. But that is not my destiny. Instead, I've been put on a solitary path. For a shining moment our ways were aligned, and I was happier than I've ever been, or ever will be. But it's time I travel to my uncertain future. I know you won't understand, but those who travel at my side do so at their peril. I see that now. It was ordained when I was born.

Before I go, I leave you with two things--my heart, and my soul. Keep them with you, safe in Little Whinging. I won't need them anymore. I can't ask you to wait, I may never return. But always remember, I make my choice because I love you.

I'll always love you.

Harry

He rolled the parchment, and tied it to Hedwig's leg. "Take it to her girl," he whispered, "and stay there. Watch her for me." He wiped his face as his owl leapt toward the window. "Goodbye," he choked.

Chapter 10 - Burning Water

As Harry sat in bed, Ron and Hermione at his side, for the first meal he'd had in over three days he didn't feel much like eating. He was expecting questions, lots of questions, but thankfully they didn't come. At first, it was as if he were eating lunch with two perfect strangers. The conversation was pleasant, the weather and recent Quidditch happenings, but no deeper. By the time his two guests had finished, Harry had only taken four or five bites. It was Hermione who could bear it no longer.

"Harry, are you okay?" It was a simple question with so many answers.

"Yeah," was all he could muster.

"I mean, I know you might not want to eat," she paused, "but maybe you'd like to talk."

"Talk about what?" he asked trying to sound as if nothing were the matter.

"Well, the accident for one thing, or why you wanted to stay with the Dursleys all summer, or your hair for that matter, and..."

"Right, mate," Ron cut her off. "We best be getting on." He was glaring at Hermione with eyes that would burn. Hermione seemed ready to burst, but just let out a deep breath.

Harry really didn't feel like talking; he didn't feel anything really. Before they had come in he had cried for a bit, but that was finished. "There's work to be done," he thought to himself. Finally he asked, "Well, you could tell me what Voldemort's up to." Predictably, Ron hissed. Hermione simply slapped him on the arm.

"Get over it, Ron," she said. She returned to her chair and spoke to Harry. "Well, nobody knows really. Some think he's retreated to the shadows now that the Ministry's on to him. He may be out gathering supporters, looking for the best time to strike. A few think that when he tried to possess you he was hurt somehow. Others think he's

turned to easier prey... Muggles. The car bomb that went off in London, some say that was done by Death Eaters."

"Car bomb?" Harry exclaimed.

"Well, that's what was reported," she answered.

"Pretty slick trick, really," Ron added. "A wizard rolls a car into a building and disappears just before BOOM! Everybody thinks he was just vaporized in the explosion."

"It's sick is what it is," Harry said flatly. "Just as sick as Wormtail's servitude... I hope he rots."

"Harry? What made you want to get an earring?" Hermione asked, trying to turn the conversation. "And your hair?"

Harry touched the lightning-bolt with the tips of his fingers. His eyes flashed toward the window. "I wish I could fly," he thought. He placed both his hands to his head and slowly combed his fingers through his hair. "I'm really tired. Maybe later." He put his head down on his pillow. Hermione made to say something, but Ron grabbed her arm for which Harry was grateful. They said goodbye and left the room.

Their last words echoed in his mind. Had he done the right thing to say goodbye to Gabriella? If Voldemort was seeking Muggle prey, what better choice than Harry's girlfriend? His arm began to ache again, a dull throbbing in his forearm. He thought back to the accident. "I wonder," he whispered. He looked down at the plate of uneaten food in front of him. He held up his right hand.

"Accio spoon," he said. Nothing happened. "Accio spoon," he said again, and again nothing happened. "What an idiot, Potter!" he yelled at himself and he made to push the tray away. But before his hand left his side, the plate on the table before him flew to the floor crashing into pieces. Not three seconds later, the door to his room flew open. It was a thin girl with a heart-shaped face and bright green hair.

"Everything okay, Harry?"

"Tonks?" Harry exclaimed, glancing quickly to her, then to the floor, then to her again.

"Last time I checked, yes." She looked the same as ever, perhaps more tan. Her black T-Shirt was emblazoned with a new band name on it, Dragon Divas. Around her neck was a pair of headphones, a wire strung to a Walkman just like Dudley's. With a wave of her wand, the floor was cleared and the plate put back on Harry's table. "Well, they'll think you were hungry anyway," she said smiling. "So, when do you get out of this place?"

"Soon, I hope."

"Do you have a ride back to the Dursley's, or would you like me to..."

"I'm not going back."

"What? What do you mean you're not going back?" She seemed quite confused about his decision.

"It was a lie," he said. "I'm not getting on with my aunt and uncle. In fact, I hate it there and I'm not going back."

"But, what about..." she stopped. "Well, I guess you can do whatever you want."

"What about what?" Harry asked. Tonks walked over to the window breathing deeply.

"It's a beautiful day today, isn't it?" she asked.

"Tell me what you mean," said Harry sharply, his temper flashing. She stood silent and then it hit him. "Was it you? Was it your job?"

"I know you hate the idea Harry, but when you're not in the house, you're more at risk. So, I asked if I could be your watcher. I could be sure you wouldn't see the same face twice. It was almost as good as being invisible." She turned to look at him. "I'm sorry," she said, managing a nervous smile. "I know it was an intrusion."

Harry was searching his mind, trying to think of when he'd seen her. He wasn't sure if he should be furious, or think she was brilliant. "Was it you... in the sporting goods shop?"

Tonks shook her head almost laughing. "No. That was my pop. There were a couple days I had to do some work for the Ministry. He sat in for me. He loves Muggle golf, that man. He was ecstatic that you worked in a sporting-goods shop. What he can't do is fly as fast as that motorcycle of yours. If something would have happened to either of you, I'd never be able to forgive myself."

"Either of us?" Harry's pitch was higher.

"Well, I was watching you all summer, Harry. I... I know about Gabriella." Harry started to speak, but she jumped in. "Look, my job was to make sure you were safe and report back to Arthur Weasley you were okay. What you did this summer is your business and my mouth is sealed." Then she smiled looking at her tanned arms and said, "I must say I did enjoy my time at the pool though."

"Then you know, you know..."

"I know you're safe enough here in St. Mungo's. I know Gabriella's safe on Privet Drive. That, Harry, is what I know. What you did behind closed doors was your own business, not mine. And it doesn't matter if those doors were to your house, a friend's house, a tire shop, or a four-door sedan." A thin smile appeared across her face. Tonks walked over and looked out the window up at the sky. "There's one thing, Harry that I don't know; do you love her?"

It fell from her mouth into Harry's lap.

"Because, if you do love her Harry, that might just cinch it, at least for me anyway."

How could he be having this conversation? He looked to the door, half hoping someone would burst in to say hello. Tonks came to his bed and held his hand. She looked down to his bandaged arm and

back to his eyes. She slipped her finger across a wisp of hair hanging on his face and stroked it back to his ear.

"You changed your hair for her, didn't you?" Harry was too deep in thought to speak. "That's how it started with me, trying to please people. They'd say they wished my hair was curly, and the next morning poof! curls. Eventually, I was able to change it, because I wanted to. Soon, I was able to change much more than my hair." For a moment she stood there and stroked his hair, then held the earring in her fingers. Harry didn't move. He was trying to take it all in and it was all coming too fast. "I hope I didn't hurt you too much." She kissed him on the forehead, and turned to leave. Before she was at the door, Harry stopped her.

"Tonks, wait. I need to know."

"We'll have plenty of time to talk, you'll see, plenty of time." She started to the door and stopped again. She took off the headphones and handed her portable stereo to Harry. "Here, you may want to listen to this for a while. It sure beats the music they pipe into this place. You can hand 'em back before you head to Hogwarts. They won't work there."

"Thanks," he said, staring up at her, his mind still off balance.

"If you change your mind about going back, let me know. Let someone know. I'll find out and get you there."

When she'd left the room, Harry found his mind swirling. His head ached and he wished he could have a Pensieve to examine his thoughts one by one. Finally, he focused on clearing his mind, of letting everything drain from it. His head lay on his pillow, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. The last thought to escape was "You love her, don't you?"

He woke when the evening's dinner cart trundled in pushed by a young girl in light-blue robes. Behind her was Mrs. Weasley. She wore a broad smile, but her eyes had dark rings under them. She seemed somewhat thinner than when they'd said goodbye just a few

months ago. She was carrying a large bag, and a vase of very bright-colored flowers.

“Harry!” She set the vase down on the table under the window. The sky outside was a vivid red, and the one cloud he could see flashed a brilliant gold on its rim. “Harry, how are you darling?” The young girl placed the food tray at Harry’s bedside and quickly left. For a moment Harry stared out the window, then returned to the room.

“Hello,” he said sitting half up on his bed.

“Here, dear, let me take care of that.” She adjusted the pillows on his bed, straightened the bedclothes and, just like Tonks, took a wisp of hair from off his face. “They told me it had grown a bit. What’s this?” She had seen the earring. “Well, Harry what’s gotten into you this summer?” Her voice was a bit reproachful, but he could tell her heart wasn’t in it.

“I don’t know,” he said, his eyes flashing to the window. “Just thought it’d be a good idea at the time. Bored I guess.”

“Well, why don’t we take it off and put it somewhere safe?” She reached toward him.

“No! Uh... no. It’s okay, really.” He found his hand on the earring, stroking the silver. Mrs. Weasley sat down.

“You look like you’ve been eating well. I guess you and the Dursleys were getting on all right.” She began to open the bag. “Your clothes were a mess, I had to toss them all. Hermione helped me pick these out. You can wear them when we take you back to the Dursley’s.”

“Take me back?”

“I think you told Ron and Hermione earlier that you were leaving with or without your clothes. I think with is a much more prudent idea, don’t you?” She smiled and Harry couldn’t help but smile back. She had truly always been like a mother to him and somehow having her here made him feel a bit stronger. “The healers say you might be able to leave tomorrow morning. The bandages on your arm will have to

stay on for a few more days, but you can remove them yourself. Now, all we need to do is get you back home safely."

"Home? Privet Drive?" he asked. She nodded. "I'm... I think Grimmauld Place is a better choice." He could see her eyes brighten noticeably. "I've got so many things to do before school starts. I just... can somebody pick up my things for me?"

"Certainly! I know just the two who can do it." Her face soured somewhat. "As much as I hate seeing them at that ridiculous joke shop of theirs..." she sighed, "and now they say they want to open another one!" She clucked her tongue. "We'll have your things waiting for you when you get home," she said, and this time home seemed to have a much warmer meaning. "Listen, Harry, there's two others that have been outside all day. They won't leave even though I've asked a dozen times. Are you up to it?"

Harry looked to the window to see the sky darkening. In truth, his head was feeling better. He took a deep breath and exhaled. Then, he nodded. It was time to talk.

A few minutes after Mrs. Weasley left, Ron and Hermione entered each carrying a food tray of their own. They both sat at the table with the fresh-cut flowers.

"You know, Harry," Ron sighed looking at some greenish-brown gravy, "you really should give us some credit eating this stuff with you. It's bloody brave really."

"Oh be quiet Ron," Hermione chided. "That's fortified with all kinds of nutrients. It might even put hair on your chest, wouldn't that be amazing!" Ron reddened noticeably. She turned to Harry. "You're looking better since lunch. It's amazing really. They might let you go tomorrow!" she smiled.

"Yeah, that's what Mrs. Weasley said."

"And you'll be going to the Dursley's then?" she asked in the most timid of voices.

“No. I’m going to Grimmauld Place.” Saying it was like swallowing something far worse than the food before him.

“That’s great, mate!” Ron garbled through a mouthful of food. “You won’t recognize the old house. Mum’s been working on it all summer. It practically looks cheerful. When we first got there....” Ron continued to describe the move from the Burrow to Grimmauld Place. He went into detail about the house cleaning efforts, and their first weeks at their new lodgings. Harry was relieved that he didn’t need to speak. He was content to listen, to eat, and to rest. Hermione finished her meal quietly as Ron spoke. Her eyes kept darting at Harry, his hand, his hair, and his earring. She was performing an examination as only Hermione could do and Harry knew it. It wasn’t until Ron started to approach the day of his vacation that her eyes started to become distracted. Finally she jumped in.

“Really Ron, you’ll bore Harry to tears. He’ll see the house tomorrow and that will be enough.” Harry saw his chance.

“Well,” he said, “I would like to hear more about your vacations.” He put his head back on his pillow and waited.

Ron looked at Hermione and she at him. Finally, Hermione spoke first. “Well, my vacation, it wasn’t much of anything really. Just a bit of fun with the family. They wanted to go to Germany this year. They have such wonderful pastries there. Dad loves German beer, and Mom loves the food. We had a chance to see some very old castles. I didn’t tell them I saw a few ghosts. It was a nice break, but that was about it.”

“You’re a good liar,” Harry thought, and then turning to Ron he said, “How about you, Ron?”

“Oh, uh, me? Well, uh, nothing like Hermione’s. Uh, we just went up to the, uh, North Coast. Saw the whales and all. Pretty cold this time of year, really. I was glad to get back.”

“You’re a bad liar,” Harry thought. He smiled and queried, “Cold?” Ron began to whiten. “The thermometers around here have been exploding. In fact I was watching the weather report the other day

and..." he stopped himself. He knew where this would go and he didn't want to go there. Not now, anyway. "Well, I hope you enjoyed the whales." Ron nodded taking in a spoonful of green gravy just to avoid having to speak.

"You look like you've gotten some sun," Hermione said brightly. "At least you've been out of the house this summer?"

"Yes, I've been doing a bit of swimming at the local pool. I met a few friends and I guess that's what led to getting this." He touched his ear and thought of Emma and Duncan. What would Duncan do when Harry wouldn't return to Little Whinging? Would he stay to finish school, or head to South Benton without Harry? Next summer, if there were one, wouldn't be the same... in many ways. "I had a job working in a sporting-goods store."

"Oh wow!" she exclaimed. "That's wonderful. Was it fun? Did you sell anything in particular?"

"We sold all sorts of sporting goods... footballs, golf supplies, ski poles. A pal of mine and I were actually thinking of starting our own store."

"To do what?" Ron asked.

"Sell sporting-goods," Harry replied quietly. Sitting in St. Mungo's the idea seemed so absurd; as absurd as talking about flying broomsticks would be while sitting in Belton's eating fish and chips.

"You're not serious? I mean, you wouldn't, right?"

"I was ready to this morning. I'm still ready, really." His eyes assessed the four corners above Ron's head. Stars were beginning to sparkle through. "Her window will be open," he thought. Would she be writing by candlelight when Hedwig arrives?

"But you couldn't. You, you're..."

"What am I Ron?" Harry spat. Then turning to Hermione he asked, "Do you know? What am I?" Deep from somewhere, hidden, the rage

began to fill him again. He stood up, wavering and then walked, his legs still unsteady, to a mirror hanging over a basin of water.

“Harry,” Hermione said, “please lay down.” She tried to hold his arm, but he tore it away. He stared at himself for some time.

“What is Harry Potter?” he bellowed looking in the mirror. “Let’s see. There he is! Harry Potter, the kid with the scar on his forehead. Did you know he talks to snakes? Pratty glory seeker if you ask me. His parents were killed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, sad isn’t it? I hear he’s in league with the Dark Lord himself. Oh, no. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named wants him dead, so we must watch out for him—keep him safe. He’s our only hope, but don’t get too close, you may wind up dead yourself.” He could feel the anger ringing in his ears.

“Voldemort will stop at nothing to see him turned to ashes. Do you know why?” He spun to Ron and Hermione and yelled, “Do you?” They were both standing, eyes wide, and mouths open. It wasn’t an expression he was expecting; they looked scared. Then he noticed they weren’t looking at him, but past him. He turned around to see the basin of water. It had risen a few inches off the counter and it was boiling. Steam was rising from its surface. The instant Harry realized what was happening, it fell, splashing hot water into the air. The burning liquid sprayed onto his legs.

“Ayyy!” he yelled.

Hermione grabbed a towel. “Here, Harry.” He took the towel quickly dabbed his legs. Red welts were springing up all over. “Stay here, I’ll get a healer.” She ran and left the room.

Ron grabbed Harry by the shoulders. His voice was shaky. “Over here, Harry. Can you sit?” Harry nodded and sat back on his bed. For a moment he stood there, silent, next to Harry, and then, placing his hand on Harry’s shoulder, he spoke again. “I’ll tell you who Harry Potter is. He’s the best mate anyone could ever have. I’m guessing there’s a few Muggles who found that out this summer.” He looked him square in the face. “It’s all you’ve ever been to me, Harry.”

Harry thought about how Ron had always endured his celebrity. Was it worse to always be in the shadow? He let out a deep breath and whatever anger he was feeling vanished. They'd never really kept secrets from each other, not many anyway. If he was going to tell anybody, Ron should know. He couldn't stand the thought of there being an invisible wall between them that only the two could see. "Listen, Ron," he said, "I need to tell you..."

"No, mate. I need to tell you. We've never kept secrets from each other and I can't now. It's just that..." Hermione burst into the room with the healer.

"It's his legs," she panted. "They're burned."

"Let me see, let me see." The healer examined his legs. "How on earth?" she gasped. Then she raised her wand. A blue-green glow emerged bathing Harry's legs. It felt cold. The blisters began to fade and then disappeared. "There's a change of gowns in the closet there. Get out of these wet ones." Harry walked over to the closet and without thinking took off his gown to grab another.

Hermione let out an "Oh!" covered her eyes and turned to face away asking the healer what the spell was she used. Harry put on a new gown and walked back to bed. He suddenly felt very tired again and his head was pounding.

"Where in the name of Merlin did you get boiling-hot water?" the Healer asked. "There's nothing here that..." Harry, fell to one knee at his bedside.

"My... my head. It's starting to hurt again." Quickly she helped him to bed. "Try to relax; I'll get your potion." As she left the room, Hermione came to his bedside.

"Harry, are you okay?" He sat up in bed and glanced at the door.

"Yeah, I just needed to get her out of here. I'm tired of questions." He put his head back on his pillow. It did ache. "I hate questions."

Again Hermione's voice became somewhat smaller. "You do know, the water, that's... that's..."

"Not normal?" Harry helped. "Surprise!" The sarcasm in his voice was thick. "Harry's not normal. He talks to snakes, he sees through the mind of Voldemort, and now..."

"... now he does magic, serious magic, without a wand," she finished his sentence with a whisper. Ron stood silently. "How long Harry?" she asked. For a moment he stared into space, and then he told her. He told her about the glass at the zoo, the Dementors last year and being able to light his wand without touching it. Without mentioning Gabriella, he told her about the shattered mirror, and the food tray, and ended with burning water. He left out that he almost killed a police officer. She sat down, calculating, as only Hermione could and asked, "It might be innocent enough. Have you tried without being upset or emotional?" Harry nodded.

"It doesn't work," he said. "This stays in this room, right? I don't need to become some sort of experimental test subject or something. You'll tell nobody?" It was Hermione's turn to look a little vexed.

"As if, Harry! Maybe something really has happened to your head after all."

The healer came in with a potion. "This will help your head and let you rest." He took the drink and felt the pounding recede. The lids on his eyes became very heavy.

"Listen you two," he said feeling like he'd had a mug too many of Duncan's punch. A wave of exhaustion passed over him. "You're the best, really. Tomorrow, tomorrow we can..." but he never finished the words.

The room faded to black. He was at the poolside with Gabriella. Kids everywhere were splashing, shouting and laughing. He heard "Goodnight, Harry," and felt a kiss on his forehead. She was holding his hand and smiling. The clouds in the sky were bright-white and puffed out like floating cotton candy. The door to his room closed.

He was in his room on Privet Drive petting his molamar. "All I need to do is pull the cord," he thought. "Where will you take me little molamar? Can you take two?" The molamar transformed and in his hand was a small cup of coffee. He was in the Darbinyan study, her father was pacing the room, his black eyes flashing red at Harry. "I can take care of her, Mr. Darbinyan. I'm not a criminal!" He was at the couch with Soseh, her dark brown eyes seeing through to his soul. "Yes, Mrs. Darbinyan, there's someone else; don't you see the connection? That's why I'm leaving; tell her that's why. She's safer away from me." An old man in bright-green pants was helping him to his feet as Duncan chatted with Emma at the register. "Summer?" asked Harry. "There's no summer left." The old man shook his head and turned away and Harry suddenly felt very cold.

He was in a dark room, the study at Grimmauld Place. Sirius was handing him the ebon dragonhead. His face was pale, but bore a broad smile as he said, "Resist the temptation, Harry." Then the face changed; it wasn't Sirius, it was Harry. He was looking at himself in the mirror. "Who is Harry Potter?" The room behind was dark but his face glowed white. His features began to flatten, to turn gray. His hair was receding. His eyes began to turn red, burning back at him... snakelike.

"No!" he yelled. The mirror shattered in silence.

The sound of screeching filled the air and Harry opened his eyes. It was morning and he was in St. Mungo's. Perched on the chair at his bedside was Hedwig, a letter still tied to her leg. "It didn't work," he whispered. Feeling shaky, he laid his head back on his pillow, but Hedwig pecked him on the back. Harry turned and looked again. It wasn't the same letter he'd sent. This was a regular white envelope; Gabriella's perfume filled the air and for the briefest of moments Harry forgot he was a wizard.

Chapter 11 - An Unhappy Inheritance

It was dawn, but still quite early. The sky was a glowing deep purple and in the dim light it took Harry a moment to adjust his eyes and clear his head. He slipped on his glasses and patted the edge of his bed where Hedwig hopped to his side. He untied the post from her leg and held it in his hands. The dreams of the night before were washed from his mind as he looked at the writing. It was addressed simply: Harry, My Love. His heart began to pound. "This is silly," he thought. "Get a hold of yourself." Before he slipped the seal, he took in a deep breath and resigned to stay the course he had laid down. He would not be swayed. She was safer where she was and that was the end of that. Carefully, he opened the letter.

My dearest Harry,

Hedwig was in my room waiting for me when I got home. Mama asked why I was crying so, and I told her that you had gone. I saw them gathering your things through the window. It was Fred and George. I grabbed Fred when he came out; I think I frightened him a bit. (Tell him I'm sorry I was so rough.) He walked with me and we talked. He's not too bad, really; in fact, he's sweet. He says you'll be off to school soon.

You have nothing to be sorry for. There's nothing I would have ever done differently. You say you travel your path alone, but you don't. From what Fred tells me, there are many others who walk on either side. I'll be happy to stay a few steps back, for now if that's what you want. Don't think you'll get too far ahead--you won't. I'm keeping your heart and soul though. I've got this pretty little box Mama made to keep them in. I think you might be surprised how quickly you will have us all back.

I'm going to the store tomorrow to buy some decent food for Hedwig. I expect to see her again, and before too long. I asked Fred to let me keep one thing of yours -- just something to remember you by when I brush my hair at night. I hope you won't mind, but it's Padfoot's mirror. I guess if you do mind, you can come to get it.

I've glimpsed a bit into your heart, and if you look into mine you'll see that I will hold yours warm and safe in my little box. You'll also see that I love you, and will wait for you to return.

Love--now and forever,

Gabriella

He read the note several times, and with each reading his smile widened. He had thought of giving her the mirror himself, but it was foolishness to think he would use it to speak with her. He would do all he could to shield her from the Wizarding world. One day, they might reunite and just knowing that she had the mirror made him feel happier. Hedwig gave a little hoot.

"I'm sorry girl," he said. "All I have is a bit of bread. There might be some mice outside." She nipped at the piece of bread. "We're leaving to Grimmauld Place today. If you decide to wander off, meet me there, okay?" He stroked her feathers and she flew out the window. As soon as she left, Harry got up and put his clothes on. He winced as he pushed his arm through his T-shirt. His mind flashed back to when his body was sliding along the pavement. Looking at the bandages, he stretched the fingers on his right hand. He was lucky he even had an arm.

The basin by the mirror had been filled again with water. He splashed his face, ran his fingers through his hair, and towed off. He put his glasses on and walked over to the flowers. He remembered the day he saw Gabriella looking at the flowers in her new garden and then he remembered his own loitering outside looking for weeds he knew weren't there. "Was she outside on purpose?" he wondered. "Waiting for me?" That moment, Mrs. Weasley entered his room.

"Good morning dear!" she said smiling. "Good, I see you're dressed. We can go now or after breakfast, which would you..."

"Let's go now. I just need to know... my wand?" he asked.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot." She reached into a large handbag and pulled out his wand. "Here you go, dear." She paused and checked

the room. "The twins have gathered all your other things and brought them to the house. Shall we go?" Harry looked around at the room, then up to the open window. The sun was starting to fill the frame. He nodded and walked out the door, Mrs. Weasley at his side.

St Mungo's was the same as he had remembered. He thought of the Longbottom's and touched his forehead. "What if this belonged to Neville instead?" he thought. As they walked down the corridor, they past a sign: ARTIFACT ACCIDENTS. "Mrs. Weasley?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry?" They entered the main atrium.

"Mr. Weasley had two others in his room with him. I was by myself. Why?"

"It was just safer, dear."

"So, I'm still being watched?" he asked coolly. Her face reddened.

"No one's been watching you; we've just been making sure you're safe, that's all."

"Because you think he's after me?" The pink in her face turned ashen. She nodded. "Do you know why?" he asked simply wondering what her answer might be. Instantly, the blood returned to her face, and fire lit her eyes. She placed one hand to Harry's cheek.

"He's pure evil Harry. Even when he was simply Tom he would never consider failure an option. Now he sees himself all-powerful and yet a mere child has bested him. Well, not so much a child anymore, are you?" She now had to look up to see his eyes. Pausing for a moment, she took his hand. "He won't stand for it. He'll risk all to rid the world of you, Harry. It'll be his ruin; I think we both know that. But, it also means we must be watchful. YOU must be watchful. This is not the year to go off wandering the grounds at night, or playing with giants in the Forbidden Forest." Harry's eyes widened. They stepped to the street where a limousine was there to take them to Grimmauld Place. She looked up and down the street. "We must all be extra careful this year." They stepped to the car and soon left St. Mungo's behind them.

When they walked through the front door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Harry stood awestruck. The first thing he noticed was the light. It wasn't dark and dingy but bright and airy. The next thing he noticed was the smell, or rather the lack of smell. The air was fresh, not dank and moldy. The first words out of his mouth were, "Where's his mother?"

"Oh yes, well, that required Dumbledore's help. He stopped by the house here only a few nights after... well, after Sirius had left us. The old hag began to scream bloody murder calling Sirius a mudblood lover and a traitor to Wizarding kind. I don't think I've ever seen Albus quite so angry. He simply raised his wand and she was gone. He hasn't said how or where. None of the Order could even get her unglued from the wall and believe me we all tried. Makes for a nice change, I think. Well, let's see who's here." She started forward to the kitchen door, but Harry's feet were somehow stuck to where he was. "Come on, dear."

He didn't want to move. He couldn't move. He felt weak; perspiration began to prickle on his forehead. It was suddenly very hard to breathe. He reached for the edge of the door as the room began to spin upside down. Mrs. Weasley quickly grabbed him by the arm just in time to stop him from collapsing to the floor.

"Harry, what's wrong?" He couldn't answer. The room's air had disappeared. His sight was failing; everything was turning dark. "Ron! Hermione!" he heard her yell as if from far, far away. Soon, everything was black.

A voice echoed from the darkness. "He's not gone you know, just on the other side." It was Luna Lovegood, but he couldn't see her. "The voices... didn't you hear them? If only we could find a way to see them. But you know the way, don't you, Harry? Can't you see the key? It's right here." But Harry couldn't see anything. "If anyone can find a way, Harry, you can. If you see my mother, tell her I miss her so." The voice was fading... "Harry, can you hear me..." Another voice broke the blackness.

"Harry! Can you hear me?"

It was Hermione. Cool air seemed to rush into his lungs; he could breathe again. Slowly his eyes opened. He was in bed in the room he had stayed the summer before. The same empty portrait of Phineas Nigellus hung on the wall opposite. The bed was bigger, and he looked up to find four faces staring down at him: Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, Ron and Remus Lupin.

"I don't know," Mrs. Weasley spoke first. "Perhaps it was too early to bring him home. They said he'd had a bad night."

"Give him time, Molly," Remus replied. "Harry, how are you feeling?" Harry brought his head off his pillow. He was a bit confused.

"I'm okay," he said, not really sure how he felt. "I don't know what came over me," he lied. He knew exactly what it was. He knew before he'd walked through the door. It didn't matter how much Mrs. Weasley had cleaned. He didn't want to be here. The thought of Sirius hung in the air. It was part of the walls that still had the portraits of the Black family. It would be only a matter of time until he saw Sirius' photo again, as Moody had shown him the picture last year of his parents before they had been murdered.

"Here," Lupin said, "try this." He handed Harry a large bar of chocolate. Harry was still somewhat unsteady.

"Dementors?" he asked thinly.

"No," said Lupin with a smile, "great deal on Fizzing Fudgebars at Honeydukes. Then he turned to the others in the room. "What do you say we give Harry some time to rest?"

"No," Harry said taking a bite of chocolate, "I'm okay really."

"Now dear," said Mrs. Weasley taking Harry's hand, "they said you should just rest for a couple of days." Everyone began to file out of the room. He was desperate; he didn't want to be left alone, not here, not now.

"Remus?" he called. "Do you have a minute?" Remus returned and sat down in a new chair that was not in the room last year. Harry

searched for something to say--anything. "Where's the other bed?" he asked.

"Well, Molly's spread things out a little. Fred and George aren't here this summer, Ron's in their room. She and Arthur are staying in," he paused, "in the master bedroom. Ginny and Hermione are still rooming upstairs. We haven't decided what to do with Buckbeak, yet." He shifted in his chair and looked uncomfortably at the empty portrait. "The fact is Harry we need to talk; I just don't think now's such a good time." Harry put the half-eaten chocolate bar on a small table next to his bed.

"All I have is time, Remus." His words were hollow.

"Then... then you should know that the Weasleys are only living here temporarily. It's Arthur's new position that puts him and his family at risk--just a precaution really. They were too exposed out at the Burrow." He paused, again searching for words to say. "Harry, Sirius has left the house to you. There's more than just the house; we found the papers downstairs after he died. Essentially all he had, all the Black family had goes to you, Harry."

Harry looked at the walls. They were clean, and looked freshly painted. The carpet, a light baby-blue, looked as if it had just been installed. Tears began to fill his eyes, and he looked to the ceiling. "I don't want it," he whispered.

"He didn't want it either," Lupin said kindly. "Too many memories... too many bad memories, really. But you have a chance to start some new ones Harry--maybe some good ones." Harry didn't answer; the tears were falling back on his pillow. "Well," Lupin said as he stood up, "you need to know it's yours. Molly's been waiting to get your permission to take care of a number of things. One of those is Buckbeak." He walked over to the window, the sun glowing off bright-white curtains. "You also need to know that there's more to the Black estate – other homes and, of course, an account at Gringotts. Well, not really an account, more like a fortune."

"I don't want it!" Harry yelled. "I don't want any of it!"

"Of course you don't, Harry. No good soul wants to come into money like that, but it's yours. It's never about how much, Harry. What you do with it, how you use it and to what purpose, that's what makes the difference." Remus walked over and sat at Harry's bedside. He took Harry's hand. "Your father and Sirius were my family. They were closer than brothers. I'd be dead now if it weren't for the two of them. Before Sirius died, I made a promise in case something should happen to him. I swore I'd watch out for you, and I will." He squeezed Harry's hand tight. "And I swear to you now, Harry. We will destroy those who took them away from us." For a moment, fire flashed in his eyes. Harry could make out the werewolf in Lupin's face, but the look soon softened and the grip on Harry's hand relaxed. "There is much to discuss, Harry, but not now. Now, you need to rest, if only for an hour." He started out of the room. "Ron and Hermione have missed you terribly. Perhaps, you could put on a face of reciprocation." He paused for a moment, looking down at his shoes. "Cherish your time with your friends, Harry. It is precious," he choked and left the room.

Harry turned on his side and cried. The tears soaked his pillow, and still he cried. All the money in Gringotts couldn't bring them back. All he would ever have was pictures. He held his bandaged hand flat against the wet white sheet. He needed her here; he felt so terribly alone -- it hurt.

Harry did not leave the room that morning. It was not until Mrs. Weasley came to the door that he lifted his head off the pillow. "Harry, dear," she said, "you really must eat something. I can bring it up if you'd like to be alone."

"I'll be down," he called. "Just give me a minute."

"Take all the time you need dear; we're not going anywhere today."

He sat up at the side of his bed. His hair was wet. He felt miserable. He walked over to the dresser where Mrs. Weasley had set a basin of water and fresh towels. On the wall was a mirror. He looked at his reflection. He not only felt miserable, he looked it. His face was puffy and his eyes swollen and red. His wet hair hung down limp like the greasy strings dangling from Snape's scalp. He took a towel and leaned over to dry his hair as best he could. "Get a hold of yourself,

Harry,” he thought. He closed his eyes and tried to relax, standing up with the towel over his face. His hands were flat against his cheeks, and his fingers gently pressed his eyes. He took a long deep breath, tossed the towel aside and reached for a brush in a hopeless attempt to set his hair straight. When he looked back to the mirror, he stood frozen.

The reflection looking him in the face was not there a minute ago. The puffiness was gone, the circles around his eyes were gone and, he leaned closer, the redness had disappeared. “That’s impossible,” he whispered. He looked down at his two hands turning them over in front of him. “Who are you?” he said out loud, and then, looking back at his reflection, he said “What are you?” He could hear his name being called from downstairs. “Coming!” he yelled. With his left hand he felt the bandages on his aching right arm. He reached for his wand in his back pocket. It wasn’t there. He glanced across the room and saw it lying on his bedside table. It was some ten feet away, not much more than it had been last year. He held out his right hand. The door to his room creaked open and at the very same instant he called “Lumos!” The wand burst into a brilliant white light.

“It’s true!” said Hermione standing at the door, a slight look of surprise on her face. Behind her, looking over her head stood Ron, his jaw hanging somewhere around his shoes.

“Bloody hell,” was all he mustered.

Harry felt the fingers in his right hand begin to tingle. He made a small fist and stretched his hand, and the odd sensation disappeared. He knew they were standing there, but he wanted to try. He raised his hand again and commanded, “Accio wand!” Nothing happened. “Accio wand!” Again, nothing happened. “Well, not so spectacular is it?” He sighed and walked over to pick his wand up.

“Are you kidding?” Ron exclaimed. “That was fantastic. I mean... well... here.” He put his own wand on the bedside table. He walked over to where Harry stood, held out his hand and called “Accio wand!” Nothing. “Accio wand!” Nothing. “Lumos!” Again, nothing. Hermione let out a great sigh. Ron glowered at her. “Well, let’s see you try then!”

"I'm not going to try," she said. "I can't do it. I don't know of anyone that can, not like that. I mean, we all can do a little something without our wands, right?" Ron just looked at his shoes. "Magic slips out, usually when we're emotional or upset. Chants and incantations for charms or hexes require constant eye contact and tremendous concentration." She looked at Harry and shook her head and then repeated, "I don't know anyone who can do it like that. But I'll find out if there have been others when we get back to Hogwarts." The cogs of Hermione's mind began to turn. "It won't be in any of our old books. Maybe I can look while we're at Flourish and Blotts buying supplies." For a moment, Hermione was lost in concentration, then shook her head and returned to the present. "Let's go, Harry. You need to eat, and besides you know better than to..." A sudden flame burst in the center of the room, a note, and a tail feather... a phoenix tail feather. Harry grabbed the note.

Harry,

As much as I admire your capabilities, magic by students is forbidden outside of Hogwarts, with or without a wand. And please be sure to remind Mr. Weasley as well.

Headmaster Dumbledore

He stared at the note dumbfounded. "But how?" he whispered.

"How what, mate?" Ron took the note and read it. "Blimey, that's impossible! He's half-way around the world trying to recruit supporters." He looked at Hermione. "It's from Dumbledore, he knows Harry's done magic!" He handed her the note. She read it and shook her head.

"Well, however he knows, you're lucky Dumbledore's in charge again, Harry. You could have been expelled," she chastised. Ron rolled his eyes. "And that goes for you too, you know," she added.

"I'm hungry," was all Harry could say. "Let's eat."

The three made their way down the stairs to the kitchen. The smell of browning sausages and roasted potatoes filled the air.

“Well, it’s about time,” Mrs. Weasley scorned. Then turning to Harry and directing him to a chair she asked consolingly, “Are you feeling alright, dear?”

“Much better, thanks.” Mrs. Weasley filled their plates, and they began to eat. Harry was famished. It was the first time he could remember asking for a second plate before Ron. Half way through he noticed. “Where are the others, Remus and Ginny?”

“Remus had some work to take care of,” Mrs. Weasley said, “and Ginny’s visiting the Thomas’s.”

“The who?” he asked.

“Dean,” injected Hermione. “She’s visiting Dean and his family. They’re traveling up on the... Well, on vacation.”

“Is that safe?” Harry asked.

“Exactly what I said Harry.” Ron jumped in. “Traipsing off all over the country when You-Know-Who’s trying to kill us all.”

“Oh, Ron,” Mrs. Weasley scolded, “be quiet. You know perfectly well Mad-Eye’s with them, and if he’s there, nothing’s going to happen.” Ron seemed to slump somewhat.

“It’s just not...”

“Ron,” Hermione interrupted, “we’ve been over this time and time again. I know Harry hasn’t heard it all, but would you please wait until later so I don’t have to hear it again for the two-hundredth time?” Ron just sat and sulked.

The afternoon was growing late. Harry had had his fill, and was feeling somewhat tired again. His head still didn’t seem to be on all the way straight. He sat up off the bench and started to the door. “I’m sorry, but I think I’ll rest for a bit.”

"Hey mate, you dropped something." Ron reached to the floor, and picked up a small white folded envelope. Harry's heart skipped. It had fallen from his back pocket.

"Oh, yeah, that's mine." Harry walked briskly to snatch it from his hand just as Ron was pulling the folded paper closer to his face.

"...my Love," he read out loud before Harry had a chance to tear it from his hands. Harry quickly slipped it back into his pocket and began to walk to the door. But before he made his escape Ron queried, "My Love, what?"

"I don't know, just found it at St Mungo's." Harry was grasping for ideas to cover his tracks.

"Found it?" Ron asked again blankly. "Well, then, let's have a look. Might be kind of fun. Have you read it already?" He stood up and was walking toward Harry, when Hermione stood up blocking his path.

"Come on, Ron," she said. "You heard Harry. He's tired. Let him rest."

"Yes, Ron," Mrs. Weasley added to Harry's defense. "Leave the poor boy alone. Go on Harry. Ron, you can help wash these dishes and make sure they clean themselves properly this time." She waved her wand and brushes began to soap the plates in the sink. Ron sighed and sulked over to the sink grabbing his wand and pointing it at a towel. "Come on Harry, let me walk you to your room."

"I'm alright, really."

"I know; there's just one thing I want to talk to you about." As they were climbing the stairs, she said. "You understand we're only here temporarily."

"I know, Remus told me," he replied.

"Yes, of course. And you know then that this... all of this... belongs to you." Harry nodded, swallowing hard. "I've tried to leave as much of Sirius in the house as I could. I wouldn't presume to know how you

feel. I can take it all down or leave it all up, or anything in between. Just give the word, Harry, it's your house, and we're grateful we can stay here."

"You can have it," he said with an empty voice. "I don't... I don't..." He began to shake and Mrs. Weasley reached out and held him tight in both arms.

"I know, dear, I know. We'll get through this together; I promise you that. But, maybe you could promise me something?" She held him back and looked into his eyes. "Don't try it on your own, Harry. Have faith in those around you, those that love you, and those that you love. They'll bring you strength, Harry." She let go and escorted him into his room rubbing his back.

She picked up the wet towel and scanned for anything else. "Fred and George brought your trunk last night. You have your broom and a few more items in the closet out in the hall. They say they had help making sure you got all your things. I guess it's about time that uncle of yours started acting like a human being. Later, I'm afraid, we need to discuss two more items... Buckbeak and Kreacher."

"Kreacher!" The hair on the back of Harry's neck rose instantly and he started for the door. Mrs. Weasley took his arm.

"Kreacher's dead, Harry. He came back to die. We think he returned to fulfill his one true dream of being mounted with the other house elves in the hall. Arthur has him in a box upstairs. We can't... well, it's not for us to decide, Harry."

The film in Harry's mind began to play again... Kreacher's betrayal, Harry's folly, Sirius' death. He wouldn't have the head mounted in the hall to remind him everyday of how Kreacher outsmarted him, of how he stood there and lied to his face, and how stupid Harry had been for believing only because he wanted Hermione to be wrong, only because he wanted to be right, to be the hero. He began to shake again. Mrs. Weasley walked him back to his bed and sat down beside him.

"I knew I should have waited, but Arthur wanted you to know the day you got home. He said that each day I waited would make it more difficult. Oh, Harry, I'm... I'm so sorry." She began to cry, holding him in her arms again. "I know you loved him; we all did in our own way, and now we all miss him so."

They sat there like that, the two, for some time. Finally, Mrs. Weasley stopped shedding tears, and Harry stopped shaking. Indeed, his eyes were quite dry. "You need to rest, dear. We'll talk more later." She stood up and made her way to the door, when Harry's voice stopped her.

"Mrs. Weasley?" he called. His voice was suddenly steady, but cold as ice. "Can you get the others off the wall? The other house elves?" Without turning to look at him she nodded. "I want them out of the house. Take Kreacher and all the rest, and get rid of them. I don't care if you give them a proper burial, burn them, or throw them in the dustbin. I don't give a damn. I... I never want to see a bloody house elf again! To hell with them all!"

Her back still toward Harry, another tear began to streak down Mrs. Weasley's face. "Yes, dear," she said calmly, closing the door behind her.

Chapter 12 - A Scar Too Deep

Buckbeak seemed to smile at Harry as he entered to spend yet another evening with the Hippogriff. The day had been cloudy and offered one of summer's first respites from the heat. Harry bowed low and when the creature returned the gesture he patted it on the neck and fed it a rabbit. Harry sat down on the floor of straw finding it difficult to think about anything other than Gabriella. For two weeks the Hogwarts students had remained in the house. Hermione tried to analyze Harry's powers, but unable to try some of her ideas until they returned to Hogwarts, they soon dropped the subject completely. Harry kept quiet about Tonks' hint that he might be a Metamorphmagus. In fact, he kept quiet about a lot of things. He couldn't bring himself to talk about Gabriella in front of Hermione, and he was never alone with Ron long enough to tell him. Harry had decided they would release Buckbeak when they all left for school. He would be setting free yet another reminder of Sirius, and he found himself spending much of his days alone with the creature listening to the Walkman Tonks gave him.

He had sent no more letters to Gabriella. There had been several attempted starts and stutters, but he always found he had nothing to say. His letters became lists of twenty questions asking about Duncan, Emma, or the other things that were going on in town. If he hadn't been such an idiot, her hands could be around his waist right now. He was imagining the two of them on his motorcycle riding down a country road, but then his mind flashed to the accident, which had now so often played like the film of Sirius' death. He could see them in slow motion flying through the air, the policeman, Gabriella lifeless on the ground. A stabbing sensation shot down his right forearm.

He'd left the bandages on because his arm still ached and because of his last memory of what it looked like--ground hamburger meat. It had started to smell a bit and he imagined it would be terribly scarred. Of course they'd probably be able to heal that, or maybe had already. Still he was strongly apprehensive, even when Mrs. Weasley suggested he take it off at breakfast earlier that morning. Buckbeak walked to the far corner of the room when Harry decided to take a peek.

He started at the bicep and began to unravel the bandages. The first layer revealed a second thinner wrapping around his forearm. The foul smell grew strong, but his upper arm seemed unscathed. Slowly, he began to remove the bandage around his forearm. All looked well until he noticed a small bit of scarring on the soft fleshy inside of his forearm. "To be expected," he thought. He unwrapped another turn. The scar appeared to be a shape. "What?" he whispered. Another turn of the cloth, and there was no mistaking an odd looking lightning bolt and the tail end of a serpent. He froze as adrenaline began to pump through his veins. "How?" His heart raced. "No!" he whispered again. His mind was flashing to the marks of the Death Eaters. "It can't be." His breathing quickened. Finally, in a sudden flurry, he unwrapped the cloth completely and held his forearm tight with his other hand and examined it closely.

Thinly etched on the soft skin, as if carved with a knife, were the winding coils of a snake. The tip of its tail began where two small lightning bolts crossed, then wound up to form the handle of a sword. Below the hilt, the coils flared out to make the guard and then wrapped more tightly, straightening, until halfway down his forearm the flat blade erupted from the snake's mouth poised ready to strike. The blade extended to a sharp point just above Harry's wrist. It looked to Harry like a Basilisk spitting the Sword of Gryffindor. It wasn't the Dark Mark of Voldemort, but what was it?

He was frightened, but the pace of his heart began to slow. At first he was hesitant, but then slowly the fingers of his left hand traced the edges of the scar. It didn't hurt, but it was real; it was his skin. Had they done something to him at the hospital? Was this some kind of trick? And if it wasn't, what then? Most wizards would probably take it as the Dark Mark, nobody would think there was a difference, or perhaps they'd think he did it on purpose, just trying to get attention.

There was a knock on the door. Ron poked his head in. "Hey, mate., mind if I..."

"Uh, no," Harry said panicking, "Buckbeak, he's... he's really in a state tonight." Buckbeak continued to stare placidly at the wall munching on a rabbit bone.

“Seems okay to me,” Ron said and started to enter.

“No! Really, I uh, I...”

“You took the bandages off! Did it heal okay?” Ron continued to press toward Harry who was now looking for an escape that wasn’t there. Harry put his arm behind his back.

“It’s not too good Ron,” he said. “I think I’ll need to put the bandages back on again. You really don’t want to see.” The ploy failed and only made Ron more curious.

“Let’s give it a look then.” Harry closed his eyes and screwed up his face. If he was going to tell anybody, he could tell Ron, right?

“Swear to me you won’t scream and run out the door?”

“Just let me see the thing!” Slowly, without looking, Harry brought his forearm around revealing the fleshy underside to his friend.

“Oh no!” Ron screamed. “It’s horrible... just horrible!” He held his hands to his face his eyes wide, and then he started to laugh and shoved Harry on the shoulder. “You’re so full of every-flavor beans. Come on, mum’s got dinner ready and we have guests! Ginny’s back with Mad-Eye.” Ron started out the door.

Harry was lost. He watched Ron leave, and then looked back down to his arm. The scar was gone. His arm was perfectly smooth as if nothing had ever happened. He was dumbfounded, where did it go? He picked the bandages up off the floor and put them in the dustbin. On his way down to dinner he stopped at his room and put on a long-sleeved shirt. If it was going to pop out again, he didn’t want anyone noticing.

When he walked into the kitchen, everyone had already started to eat. A place had been set next to Mad-Eye who had yelled out “Hello Harry!” just before he opened the door. As he entered the kitchen, Mrs. Weasley started for him.

“Ron says the bandages are off. Let’s have a look!” He’d had his hand on his forearm the whole time, and hadn’t felt the scar rising on the skin. Quickly he pulled back the sleeve, showed her the back of his arm and elbow, and pulled the shirtsleeve down. “How does it feel?” she asked.

“Just fine,” he lied, hiding the fact that it still ached. “Everything looks wonderful!” He took his seat at the table.

“Hi Ginny!” said Harry with a smile.

“Hi Harry! How was your...”

“What’s that on your ear, Potter?” Mad-Eye asked, not turning his head from his plate; although Harry knew that his magical eye was probably turned right at him.

“An earring,” he answered.

“Yeah? Where’d you get it? Not off some stranger, I hope. It might be charmed! Hasn’t anyone checked?”

“Uh, it’s fine, really.”

“Molly! You let the boy come here with that in his ear. I hope you tested it to make sure it wasn’t hexed!”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” she spoke up in Harry’s defense. “Still, if he wants, we can have Remus take a quick look when he gets back.” Harry, his mouth full, nodded his head and that seemed to satisfy Mad-Eye. Ginny passed him the milk.

“How was your summer, Harry?” she asked. “I heard you had an accident.”

“I dropped Sirius’ motorcycle, and hit the curb. I was just going too fast.” Ginny gave a small gasp.

“He was almost taken is what happened,” Mad-Eye interjected. The whole table turned to Mad-Eye. Harry had deliberately been vague about the accident and the news was a surprise.

“Now Mad-Eye,” Mrs. Weasley spoke out, “we don’t know that Harry was almost taken.”

“Don’t we Molly? A police officer was on the scene of the supposed accident. He had a fourth-degree stunning spell slammed straight into his chest. If they hadn’t gotten there the moment it happened he would have died, and Harry would have been next!” Hearing Mad-Eye’s words everyone gasped.

“Harry!” Hermione sputtered. “You didn’t say anything about being stunned!”

“I wasn’t stunned. I-I left before it all happened. There were people coming out of their houses, and I just... I left.” His shoulders slumped. Hearing the words from his own mouth churned his stomach; suddenly he wasn’t hungry anymore. Mad-Eye gave a small grunt, but nothing more. Harry, pushing the beans around on his plate, felt a dozen eyes staring at him. Ginny tried to break the tension.

“Well, I like your hair and your earring Harry. It grew pretty fast in just a couple months.” Harry simply nodded.

“Thanks,” he said. Then Harry tried to change the subject. “How was Dean?” he asked, and a broad smile broke out on Ginny’s face; it was just the right thing to ask.

“He was perfect. His family was so sweet and kind.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Weasley with a bright smile, “the Thomas’ have always been the very best of people.”

“What did you do?” Harry asked.

“Uh, Harry,” Ron interrupted, “can I talk with you for a second.”

“Harry is talking to me now, Ron,” Ginny snapped. “You can wait.”

"Well, I don't need to hear more about Dean Thomas this, and Dean Thomas that, do I?" he yelled, and he stood from the table and left the kitchen in a huff. Harry was confused. Hermione sighed.

"Let me go talk to him," she said and left to bring him back.

"Good riddance," Ginny continued, clearly agitated. "He's been nothing but a royal pain-in-the-neck since I told him about Dean on the train. You'd think I'd stolen the boy away from him, honestly!" She took a spoonful from her plate. "Anyway, we had a wonderful time. Spent most of the week up on the North Coast. The humpbacks are migrating. They were spectacular! One whale flew straight out of the water," her hand shot up in the air, "turned on its side and CRASH! What a huge wave!"

"Humpbacks?" Harry asked, one eyebrow raised. "How was the weather?"

"Wonderful really, not nearly as hot as down here, but you could still wear a T-shirt. Dean bought me this." Around her neck was a gold necklace from which hung a bluestone whale charm. Harry could see that her eyes were twinkling just thinking of Dean. He was truly happy for her.

"That's fantastic. I always knew Dean had good taste," he said with a grin and Ginny blushed.

"Well, Miss Weasley," Mad-Eye said with a growl, "you'd better have that little token checked as well, before you wake-up in the middle of the night with it choking you to death." At that both Harry and Ginny had to laugh.

"And what about your summer, Harry?" Ginny asked. "Were the Dursleys awful again?"

"No, not too bad." His mind wandered. "Uh, look I better go check on Ron. We can talk more later, okay?"

"Sure," she said. "Maybe tomorrow at Diagon Alley?" she asked and Harry nodded.

He stood up from the table, thanked Mrs. Weasley for dinner and excused himself. Outside the kitchen door, the entranceway was empty. He started toward the study, but the thought of seeing the Black family tapestry on the wall turned him to his own bedroom. Perhaps he'd try a letter again tonight. The stairway was now unadorned with the heads of house-elves; a simple shimmering blue covered the walls. When he arrived at his room, he heard arguing further up the stairs; it had to be Ron and Hermione. He took a few steps upward. He could make out Hermione's words first.

"Well, if he didn't have a pretty clear idea at the hospital, he's dead sure now."

"I didn't think..."

"No, you didn't think! You never think. We agreed we wouldn't tell him, right?"

"Well, that was before." Ron was trying to find his voice in the argument.

"Before what?" she snapped.

"They tried to kill him, Hermione! Didn't you hear Mad-Eye? Harry didn't tell us that, did he? Why not, do you suppose? He's hiding something, too." Suddenly Ron's voice softened. It was almost tender. "Hermione, I've never kept a secret from him, not like this. I can feel the tension in the air whenever we're together. He has to know."

"You know what it'll do to him? Oh Ron, we can't," she pleaded. "We were off battling for the Order and Harry was left out of it for his own safety. Leave it alone."

"I don't know," he whispered.

"Harry has to be on top of his game this year. He can't be distracted. We're talking about his life, Ron. Leave it alone." There was a long silent pause.

"Okay," he said with a sigh, "for now."

"It's the right thing Ron, really." They started toward the stairs and Harry quickly stepped down and into his room leaving the door ajar. Hermione was first in with Ron close behind.

"Hey, mate," Ron said. "Diagon Alley tomorrow, eh?" Harry shrugged his shoulders. Sitting in his chair, he feigned reading the Daily Prophet. "I wish I'd done as well in my O.W.L.S. as you two," said Ron forlornly. "I guess this makes the first time that..."

"Yep," Harry interrupted not looking up from the paper. "The first time we're not in the same classes."

"Well," said Hermione, "that's not completely true. We'll all have Defense Against the Dark Arts, won't we? And then there's Charms too." She seemed to be making Ron feel worse. Ron had not done well. He was not admitted into McGonagall's N.E.W.T., nor Snape's -- Transfiguration and Potions. The tension Ron had spoken of began to fill the air. Harry continued to read the same page of the paper. Finally, after a silent five minutes, Ron spoke.

"I think I'll go to bed. See you in the morning." He was clearly down, but Harry was in no mood to pick him up. Ron had folded under Hermione's thumb.

"Yes, I'm rather tired too," Harry said pointedly at her. She opened her mouth to say something, but simply stood up as well.

"Goodnight, Harry," she said. "Should I shut the door?"

"Yes," he said, "I think you're smashing at it." Her eyebrows furled, but rather than fight back she closed the door behind her. He was alone. But then, when wasn't he alone? "You've been alone since you walked in the door," he thought. He pulled the sleeve up on his right

arm. He could see nothing. Had he imagined it? His fingers stroked his forearm. He grabbed parchment and quill and began to write.

Gabriella, my love.

I miss you. I miss the twinkle in your eyes. I miss the small dimple in your cheek when you smile. Your letters mean all the world to me. I will continue to write, I swear.

Could you ask your mum a question for me? I saw a drawing of a snake coiled around a sword with the blade springing from its mouth. Its tail ended in the crossing of two lightning bolts. Does that mean anything? Just thought it looked interesting is all.

Tomorrow I'm off to buy books for school. Such a simple thing, really. And yet, I hate the thought. It takes me one step further from you and one step closer to the end. I wish I could see the future and tell you all will be okay. I guess we'll both know soon enough.

I love you,

Harry

It was all he could do to not throw the entire note in the dustbin. Instead, he gave it to Hedwig and sent her flying. He turned to see his reflection in the mirror. He stared, trying to assess the person standing before him. "Who are you, Harry Potter?" he whispered. Again he rubbed his right forearm, but nothing was there. "Was it a dream?" he thought. He took his clothes off and climbed into bed. Outside his door he heard Mrs. Weasley and Ginny ascending the stairs. Ginny was still going on about Dean. Harry smiled; at least someone was happy in the house tonight. He took a deep breath and cleared his mind. Soon, he was asleep.

The next morning was warm, but Harry slipped on an oversized long-sleeved shirt anyway. He was still unconvinced that the mark had disappeared forever. The breakfast conversation was quiet and Mr. Weasley was quickly off to the Ministry. Harry noticed that the lines in his face had returned. After they ate, Mrs. Weasley gathered the four Hogwarts students to travel to Diagon Alley by floo powder. Mad-Eye

would be tagging along today. Harry knew he was there for extra protection. "Potter duty," said Harry sighing to himself. Was he to be watched for the rest of his life? "Well that might not be too long, eh?" he thought dully. Thankfully Lupin, who had returned during the night, would stay behind. He was still sleeping when they left.

When they arrived, they found Diagon Alley a mass of students.

"Dean said he might be here today," Ginny said brightly scanning the crowd.

"Nobody wanders off today," Mad-Eye lectured the group. "You stay within sight of me or Molly, is that clear?" All nodded.

"First stop is Flourish and Blotts," Mrs. Weasley said brightly. Hermione surveyed Harry for the slightest moment.

"Yes," she said, "there are a few things I need to find out."

It took only a few minutes for Ron and Harry to gather their books. Ginny was off with her mother and Hermione had disappeared behind the stacks, Mad-Eye keeping his magical eye fixed in her direction.

"Mister Moody," Harry called, "can Ron and I sit out in front? It's getting awfully hot in here." The perspiration was beading on his brow,

"All right," he said. "These women will have us here all day. Don't move more than ten feet from the door, agreed?"

"Agreed!" Ron said, glad to be free if for only a moment.

The two sat at the curb just outside the door. Quite a few students came up and said hello. Many, to Harry's surprise, were greeting Ron first. His brilliant play in last year's Quidditch victory had made him quite a celebrity; even Padma Patil stopped to speak with Ron, after only giving Harry a polite, "Hi, Harry." He watched the passersby as Ron and Padma chatted. He was looking behind Ron, when something caught his eye. The T-shirt Ron was wearing had pulled up his back revealing a deep red scar that traveled from below his

waistline and disappeared up into the shirt as it curved around Ron's side.

When Padma walked away, Harry had to ask, "What's that on your back?" Ron quickly pulled down his shirt.

"Nothing," he said nervously.

"Ron, don't give me that. What is it?" Ron was silent. Then Harry remembered. "I thought they'd healed; I thought you were okay?" His voice was anxious. It was Harry's fault Ron had been hurt in the first place.

"It's nothing, mate, really." But his voice was too nonchalant to be convincing.

Harry looked him in the eyes, and then said, "Not this too, Ron." The redhead quickly looked at his shoes, then out into the street.

"Well," he said slowly, "Madame Pomfrey did all she could. There were just some marks that ran too deep, that's all."

"There's more than one? Let me see." Harry reached to look at Ron's back.

"No!" Ron stopped him. Harry sat back on the curb glancing at Ron's back and then back to his face. "I haven't told anybody, Harry. Not Mum, not Hermione..." He looked at the sky. One lone cloud sat motionless against a bright blue background. "I mean, they can see the scars on the outside, but I haven't told them... the healers... they... they couldn't get it all."

"What do you mean? The scars? They couldn't get the scars?" The pitch in Harry's voice was raised.

Ron looked at Harry and held his arm. His eyes were fixed and his jaw set. "Swear, Harry... swear you won't speak of this to anybody." For a moment he saw the same eyes Ron's mother had shown in St. Mungo's.

"You know I won't," he said.

"The brain at the Ministry didn't just wrap itself around me," he said slowly. "It grew into me."

"What!" Harry cried out. "How? Where?"

"Shhh," Ron hissed. He pulled back his collar revealing the nape of his neck. A deep red scar curled and plunged toward Ron's spine. "They tried to take it all out, but it had wrapped around my spine and... and into my own brain." Harry was stunned; his face turned white. How could he have let this happen?

"But, but you're okay, right?" he stammered. "I mean, it doesn't... it hasn't done anything to you, has it?"

"Before I left Hogwarts, I asked Madame Pomfrey not to say anything to my parents. She agreed as long as I let her check in on me over the summer. That's why she came for a visit last week."

"And?"

"And as far as she knows, nothing's changed. In fact the marks are going down, so she figures I'm healing myself... 'Rejecting the foreign invasion,' she said." He looked down at his shoes again.

"But you lied to her, didn't you?" Harry asked quietly. Ron nodded. "What's happening, Ron?"

"Voices," he whispered. "When it had me, I thought... I thought I was going to die. I don't know how to explain this... it was like drowning... drowning in thought. I had lost myself in a sea of voices. Other minds all fighting with each other for control. When I woke up at Hogwarts, they had disappeared. I thought they were gone forever, but..."

"But what?" Harry prodded.

"They're coming back. Usually, when it's crowded, I hear them; and, if I try to concentrate..." He glanced over across the street. Andrew Kirke was there looking at a parchment in his hands. "He's going to

yell for his father,” Ron whispered. A moment passed, then another. Harry was starting to think Ron was pulling his leg when Andrew’s face suddenly became vexed.

“Dad!” he yelled down the street. A dark haired man in brown robes came trotting up to his side. “I can’t get this all myself! You said you were going to give me a hand.” Moments later the son and his father walked into a shop at the corner. Harry sat in shock.

“You can read minds?” he asked. “Legilimens?”

“I don’t want to, Harry. I can’t stop it. I’m afraid if it gets to be too much, like it was in the ministry...” Ron shuddered and gasped for air.

“Then tell someone,” Harry urged. “Tell Madame Pomfrey.”

“She’ll tell my folks, and then... well, you said it Harry, I’ll become some kind of experiment or something.” He shook his head. “No, it’s not that bad. If it gets worse, I’ll let someone know.” Harry looked at him doubtfully. “I swear Harry, I’ll tell.” Ron suddenly closed his eyes. “Oh, no. He’s here.” Immediately he got to his feet and Harry followed. The same instant a familiar drawl hit their ears.

“Well, if it isn’t Potter and Weasels holding hands again.” Draco Malfoy had just come around the corner dressed in leather pants and a sweatshirt. It was too hot to be wearing long-sleeves, Harry thought touching his arm. Malfoy was thinner than Harry expected; his blonde hair without a wisp out of place. As usual, he was flanked by Goyle, but Crabbe was absent.

“Hello, Draco,” Harry spat. “Where’s your boyfriend Crabbe? Gone to visit his dad at Azkaban? Or, maybe yours?” Malfoy’s face suddenly contorted.

Malfoy reached for his wand; Harry was an instant faster. Suddenly a searing pain ran down Harry’s shoulder. He grabbed his forearm, facing Malfoy but wincing.

“Harry!” a gruff voice boomed. “Put it down! You too, Malfoy.” Draco hesitated at Moody’s command. “I hear you make a great ferret,”

Mad-Eye said holding his wand straight at the blonde's head. Reluctantly, Draco slipped his wand back up his sleeve.

"It's only a matter of time, Potter," he snapped. "They'll be free, you'll see. And you'll pay! I swear you'll all pay." He turned and stomped away, Goyle following his footsteps.

"Come on boys," Moody called, "back inside. Let's find the girls and be on our way." Ron and Harry followed Moody back into the bookstore. The door shut behind them ringing a small bell. Harry began to rub his arm.

"What is it Harry?" Ron asked.

"My arm," Harry replied, "it still burns a little." He sat in a chair as Ron watched. Carefully he slid his thumb under the cuff of his shirt. He felt the tip of the sword running to his wrist--the mark had returned. His face became panicked.

"Come on, Harry," Ron pressed, "what is it?" Harry sat silent. It was his turn to stare at his shoes.

Suddenly his mind was asking him to speak, to tell Ron, what was going on. A vision of the police officer stepping out of his car flashed in front of his eyes. Then a voice in Harry's mind called back, "No!" The film turned off and another began to play... he was surrounded, captured, choking... In the bookstore, there was a commotion and the film stopped abruptly. Harry looked up to see Ron tripping backwards over a stack of books on the floor as if someone, or something, had just pushed him.

Chapter 13 - The Viswa Vajra

With one hand Ron began to gather the books he'd scattered across the floor while he rubbed his head with the other; Harry helped him straighten the pile. No sooner had they finished, than Hermione walked in through the front door. Harry had to look twice.

"I thought you were in the stacks?" he asked.

"I was," she said simply, "but I needed to get new quills."

"But Moody said you shouldn't leave his sight," Ron warned.

"I'm not the one whose life's being threatened; it's you two and Ginny. Mad-Eye won't care if..."

"Where were you?" Moody's voice boomed from across the bookstore. He was clearly distressed. Hermione's voice suddenly became smaller.

"Just getting quills," she said holding a bag of feathers in her outstretched hand. Moody stomped up in front of her, staring down at it.

"Quills? From where?"

"The stationery shop across the street. I didn't go far."

Moody's face became even more concerned. He turned his head to look behind him into the stacks, then looked out the window. Clearly something was bothering him, but what it was he wouldn't say. His good eye was fixed on Hermione, its eyebrow raised. The magical eye had spun backwards.

"Finally," he said, exasperated, "Ginny has all her things. Let's get out of this place." A moment later, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley appeared from behind some shelving. A note of concern appeared on Mrs. Weasley's face. Harry saw her eyes dart from himself to Ron.

“What’s the matter with you two? You’re both so pale.” Harry looked more closely at Ron and indeed he did look a bit peaked. He also realized his arm was still aching and a quick check with his thumb confirmed the scar was still there. Before either of them had a chance develop an explanation, Moody spoke.

“It was Malfoy, the little ferret. Tried pullin’ his wand on Harry here.” Mrs. Weasley gasped. “Bit too fast for him though, weren’t you boy?” Moody slapped Harry on his bad shoulder making him cringe. “Tell me, what was the spell going to be?”

“Well,” Harry said, somewhat encouraged by Moody’s praise, “I thought I’d...”

“That’s enough of that sort of talk,” Mrs. Weasley cut in. “We still have loads to buy, and very little time.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent purchasing all sorts of supplies. Mad-Eye had gone off with Hermione. Punishment, Harry thought, for running off without permission. He was still a bit confused about how she could have run past him and Ron in the front of the store without being seen. He found himself with the Weasley family. By the time the afternoon sun began to wane, they all had most everything they’d need for the year. Ginny had just purchased a new cauldron and all that was left was a broomstick maintenance kit for Ron.

“I’ve got to keep it in good shape, don’t I?” he said. “We’ll have a shot at winning the cup this year.” He glanced at his sister and smiled. “I imagine the team will have two Weasleys, eh?”

“I won’t make a very good Chaser with the broom I have, Ron,” said Ginny with a frown. “I doubt I’ll even be able to make the team.”

They had just threaded their way through a large crowd to the front of the broomshop. The crowd had gathered at the storefront window where on display was the year’s latest model. Harry had never seen a crowd like it, not even for the Firebolt; people were lining up into the street just to get a glimpse. It was too much effort to try to push their way to the window.

“Well Ron,” said Mrs. Weasley, handing him some money, “run on in and get your kit. Don’t dawdle.” He grabbed the coins, gave his mom a wink, and ran inside. His smile simply made Ginny seem more miserable. Harry couldn’t think of what to say. She was right, her broom was awful, and Chasers had to have speed.

“You’ve got tremendous skill,” he said finally. “You’re sure to make the team.”

“No, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley spoke up, “really, her broom is bloody awful.” Both he and Ginny looked at her in surprise. She was always one to be satisfied with their financial circumstance. “So, I spoke to Arthur yesterday and,” a twinkle was glinting in her eye, “he thought that an early birthday gift might be in order.” Ginny gave out a tremendous squeal.

“Are you serious Mum? Really?” Mrs. Weasley nodded. Ginny wrapped her arms around her mother, kissing her face and nearly knocking her over.

“Well,” she said, “your father’s doing a bit better with his new position, but we won’t be able to buy anything new.”

“That’s okay!” Ginny yelled again. “I don’t mind, I was thinking...”

“I said it was a gift Ginny,” her mum said, “and Ron’s in to get it now. Your father was here last night and made the arrangements.” Both Harry and Ginny spun around to face the shop; Ron was still inside. Suddenly, Harry had an idea. He held his hand to his stomach.

“Uh, Mrs. Weasley? It’s been quite a while,” he said rubbing his hand in a slow circle. “I really need to, er... you know. Can I go inside?”

“Oh, very well, but straight in and straight out, and tell Ron to hurry; tell him I just couldn’t keep it a secret,” she said with a bit of excitement in her own voice.

Harry had been in the broomshop every time he’d been to Diagon Alley. He ran in just as Ron was coming to the counter. He grabbed his arm, whispered in his ear and headed to the back. “It’ll only take a

few minutes,” he called to Ron. At the rear of the shop was a large fireplace. A wizard and his son were just emerging from the ashes. In a blink of an eye, Harry was at the entryway to Grimmauld Place. There stood Lupin.

“Sorry, Remus!” he called running up the stairs. “Can’t talk now!”

Lupin caught him on the way down the stairs. “What’s going on, Harry?”

“You said it yourself, Remus, right? It’s what we do with it that matters!”

A flash, and Harry was back in the broomshop. Ron was waiting anxiously.

“When Mad-Eye finds out he’ll have a fit!” he said. Harry simply grinned. The two went to the counter, and after an exchange of some money Harry was first to emerge from the broomshop. Ginny and Mrs. Weasley were sitting on a bench in the shade across the street. Ginny stood up first and ran to Harry.

“Is that it? Is that it?” she called.

“Sorry, Ginny,” Harry said walking to the bench. “This one’s mine; I couldn’t resist.”

In his hands was the greatest broom known to the Wizarding world--The Caduceus. At first Ginny just sighed looking past Harry’s shoulder to see if Ron was coming. There was a commotion down the street: “Potter’s got one!” someone yelled. Moments later they were surrounded by the crowd.

“Give me a look, Harry!” yelled Geoffrey Hooper, a fellow Gryffindor. “Blimey, that’s beautiful. Man, I know I could fly better if I had a broom like that! My dad just wastes his money; he has no idea. Do you think I could still try out for the team, Harry? Who’s the Captain this year? I heard it might be Katie; I hope not, I don’t think she likes me very much.”

"That's because you whine all the time," Harry thought. He really hadn't had time to admire the broom in his hands, or to think about it at all. The crowd was pressing in on him a bit too much; it was starting to get uncomfortable.

"Hey, clear out now!" a voice boomed. "Give the boy room ter breathe, why don' yeh!" It was Hagrid! Harry beamed and gave him a hug before the half-giant could say another word. "Well, now," he said patting Harry on the back, "I'm happy ter see yeh too. Wha' makes yeh so popular now?" he asked with a broad smile. "Oh my, if yeh haven' changed yer look some, Harry." He touched the side of Harry's head, his hand blocking out the sun.

"It's great to see you too, Hagrid!" said Harry warmly. Mrs. Weasley stood up and walked over to them.

"Wonderful to see you Hagrid!" she called. And then she looked squarely at Harry. "I thought you needed to use the bathroom!" she scolded, squinting one eye in his direction. Harry smiled back.

"Well, I never said..." he began, but Ginny stopped him short with another squeal.

"Is that it? Is it? It is!" Ron had emerged from the shop with a broom in his hands. Ginny finished squeezing her mother and ran to Ron. "It's perfect! It hardly looks used at all," she said at first, just looking at the broom's shaft and not paying much attention to the design

"Locked up for most of a year," Harry whispered to himself.

"Oh mum! A... a... Firebolt," she beamed, "it's fantastic!" She held the broom in her hand examining every inch. "Will we see Dad tonight?"

Mrs. Weasley seemed a bit confused. Clearly she had been expecting the Nimbus 2000 that Ron had almost purchased when Harry ran into the store, but Mr. Weasley had made the arrangements and perhaps there had been a change. Unsure, she decided not to say anything about it.

"Yes, we will," said Mrs. Weasley, a bit vexed. "I want to speak with him too."

"Well, Ron yeh jus' won' stop growin', will yeh!" Hagrid ruffled the redhead's hair. "Where's Hermione?"

"Off with Mad-Eye," Ron answered.

"Well, tell her I said hello. I'm off ter pick some things up fer school." He winked and was off.

"Well," Mrs. Weasley said, adjusting her blouse, "it's been a long day. Alastor said they'd meet us back at home if we didn't get together on the street." She suddenly looked very tired. Harry saw her eyes wander off somewhere and a glance at Ron's expression showed it wasn't a happy place.

"Mrs. Weasley," he said, "how 'bout we get a bite to eat before we go. There's no reason you should have to cook tonight."

"I don't know, Harry," she said looking at the sky. "It'll be dark soon." There was the faintest hint that twilight would soon be upon them.

"Come on, Mum," Ron said putting his arm around her shoulder. "You saved a bundle on that old used thing." He shook his hand and it rang with the clang of coins. "I'll buy!" he said grinning.

A few minutes later they were all seated at a table in Dedalia's Diner. The meal was warm and filling. Ginny, against her mother's protestations, kept the Firebolt at her side during dinner. She only took her hands off of it to put another forkful in her mouth. Harry set his broom up against the wall and it soon was the center of attention as patrons walked in and out. He looked at Ginny and smiled. She had been the one bright spot in his life since leaving Privet Drive. He took a drink of butterbeer, and then remembered. He slipped his thumb up the sleeve of his shirt; the mark had gone. At least he couldn't feel it. He took a quick look down at his wrist below the table and saw nothing. That instant everything went black.

"Hello, Harry! Guess who," a gentle female's voice whispered in his right ear. Her hands, covering his eyes, were warm. He didn't need to guess, he knew.

"I'm not sure," he said playfully. "Pansy Parkinson?"

"Oh, you beast!" she said, shoving him on the shoulders. Harry turned smiling.

"Cho, it's you!" He continued to grin. He stood up from his chair and without thinking twice put his arms around her and gave her a hug. "I wish you could have been here sooner; we're just about done." Cho seemed only slightly surprised and hugged Harry in return. Then he saw, standing next to her, a reddish-blond that Harry knew only too well, Marietta Edgecombe. He could feel his temperature suddenly rising.

"Hello, Marietta," he said, forcing a smile.

"Hello Harry," she returned, but would not hold his eyes. Cho reached for Harry's head.

"I love your hair," she said. "Ooh, and a piercing too! My, my, are you turning into a rebel?" she asked with a mischievous grin. "Oh, I forgot, you already are." Her hand remained on Harry's face, and then realizing it, she quickly brought it down to her side. "Well, we were just leaving."

"How's Michael?" he asked. The words just fell out of his mouth, he didn't know why.

"Michael?" she asked back.

"Yeah, Michael Corner. I thought you two were, er..."

"Oh, that." She suddenly reddened. "Well, he was a good shoulder to cry on I guess, but I'm done crying, Harry. We have work to do, don't we? All of us?" Her eyes had a fire he'd only seen when she was on her broom in the midst of competition. "I'll see you on the train then?" she asked.

“Yeah,” he mustered, “on the train.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek and left. He turned to the table to see everyone smiling at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” Ron said, “but something tells me she still fancies you.” Harry sat back down and finished his dinner. He smiled a little to himself as he took in Ron’s words. In the same moment a pang of guilt hit him for feeling that way. Well, he wasn’t going to have time for anybody this year. Surely Cho would find someone else to keep her company. And with that thought firmly implanted in his mind they returned to Grimmauld Place.

They arrived home to find Hermione, Moody and Remus having dinner with Mr. Weasley, Fred and George. Ginny burst in to the kitchen and gave her father a hug.

“Oh, thank you Dad! You’re the greatest, I love it!”

“Well dear, it’s the least we could do. We’ve got to give Gryffindor a fighting chance for the cup this year, don’t we?”

“Yes,” said George, “you’ll have to uphold the Weasley name, won’t she Fred... Fred?” But Fred was staring, mouth open wide, at Ginny’s new broom. George looked to see what had taken Fred’s attention. “A Firebolt!” he gasped. “But Dad, you said...”

“Fred, George,” Harry cut in. “can I have a word with you for a moment?”

“But Harry did you see...”

“Now, please!” he insisted. The twins rose from their seats and came over to Harry. “I have something upstairs I need to show you.”

“Look, Harry,” said Fred glancing back to the Firebolt, “I’m sure it’s fascinating and all, but...”

“Have either of you two heard of a little something called the Caduceus?” he asked simply. George’s eyes opened wide.

"You didn't, mate?"

"He did," chimed Fred.

"I love having wealthy friends."

"But," Harry began, "if you'd rather..." Snap. Fred and George disappeared before his eyes and seconds later he could hear the sounds of howling from upstairs. Behind him, Ginny was talking to her father non-stop about the specifications and capabilities of the Firebolt.

"...and did I say it could accelerate from 0-150 miles per hour in ten seconds?" Mr. Weasley was having trouble finding his bearings.

"Yes, dear, yes I believe you did," he muttered looking to his wife. "Molly, I thought..."

"Yes," she replied, "so why did you change your mind?"

"I didn't change anything," he answered. Ron stopped talking to Remus and began to walk to Harry who was still standing by the door. "Ron?" shot his father in a sharp voice.

"Really, Dad," Ron said, "we better get up there before they ruin the Caduceus." Ginny turned to Hermione to elaborate on the Firebolt's turning ability. It was Mr. Weasley who came over to Ron and Harry.

"Come on boys, lets see it together," he said with a smile, but the tone was less than jovial. They headed to the entryway, but then turned to the study. The room was dark, save for the golden magical instruments glittering in the candlelight. Harry began to examine some markings on one when Mr. Weasley took his attention. "Suppose you tell me what happened."

"Well," Ron started in his best honest voice, "Mum said to ask for the best used broom they had and the shopkeeper would understand. That's, er, that's what he gave me."

“Come on, Ron, that Firebolt’s worth ten times what your mother gave you to pay for a broom. It was supposed to be a Nimbus 2000. Excellent condition, yes, but nowhere near a Firebolt. And she said you had change left over.” As he said the words a look of understanding came upon his face. “Harry, where’s your broom?”

“Fred and George are looking at it in my room right now,” he said innocently.

“Harry Potter, you know what I mean.”

“Honestly, Mr. Weasley, once I had the Caduceus, what was I going to do with an old Firebolt?”

“I should have known. I should have known.” Mr. Weasley began pacing the floor. “Well, she’ll have to give it back to you, that’s all there is to it.”

“What?” Ron yelled. “You can’t... you won’t.”

“I can, and I will! Harry, I appreciate you wanting to give her this gift, but we can’t...”

“I didn’t give it to her,” Harry said flatly.

“Of course you did,” Mr. Weasley said dismissively.

“No, I didn’t.” Harry said defiantly. “I sold it to Mr. Tridman at the broomshop. I’m not saying I got top dollar for it, but it was enough that I could afford to buy the Caduceus.” Harry walked over from the shelf holding the golden instruments to Arthur Weasley and looked him in the eye. “Ron is telling you the truth: He asked for the best used broom they had... it was the Firebolt.” The cogs were rolling in Mr. Weasley’s mind. It was Ron who began to smile first.

“Yes!” Harry heard him whisper.

“Alright then,” Mr. Weasley said as he let out a sigh, “alright, I’ll tell Molly what happened, but something tells me I owe you a few dinners Harry.”

"It's a deal," Harry said with a grin, "as long as Mrs. Weasley's doing the cooking."

A few moments later, he and Ron were with Fred and George examining the Caduceus for the first time.

"It's spectacular, mate," said Fred. "Did you know it has twice the acceleration of the Firebolt? Special adhesive charms to keep you from being thrown off."

"Storm-repellent spells to keep you warm and dry in cold, wet weather," added George.

"And," continued Fred, "its own specialized servicing kit."

"Caduceus?" queried Ron. "What kind of name is that?"

"It's the staff that the Roman god Mercury carried with him as he zipped about," explained George. "Two serpents coiled around a winged staff. You'll be the only one at Hogwarts with one of these, Harry." Just then there was a hoot in the window. It was Hedwig.

"A post for Harry?" teased Fred. "Hmmmm, I wonder from whom it could be." Harry took the envelope and held it in his hand.

"Look guys," he said, "I'm getting tired."

"Sure you are," said George. "Ah well, let's go Fred. We've got work in the morning. Come on Ron. Ron?" Ron was sitting in the chair by Harry's bed, his face pale and his eyes closed.

"I'll kick him out in a bit," said Harry. The twins said goodbye and disappeared. Harry sat down on his bed across from Ron, turning the envelope over in his hand. Finally he looked at Ron. "You know, don't you?"

"It was raining," he whispered. "Some girl through a window... your window? She has very dark skin."

"Yes she does," Harry said staring at the envelope. "It's the most beautiful copper brown I've ever seen."

"I could tell from Fred that she likes you," Ron spoke softly. "Do you like her?"

"She's a Muggle, Ron," he said, expecting the worst.

"Haven't you figured it out yet, mate?" Ron opened his eyes. "We're friends, right? Hell Harry, more than friends. I'm closer to you than I am to Fred and George." He paused. "Well, aren't I?" Harry nodded.

"I love her, Ron. I love her and she loves me. She was with me the night of the accident. I thought... I thought I'd killed her." The picture of her lifeless body flashed before his eyes; they became damp. "I was going to leave you all behind, just to be with her." Ron stirred in his chair, but remained silent. "Then I realized I'd be putting her life in jeopardy just to keep her at my side." He fell back on his bed. "I won't hold her lifeless body in my hands, not again, not ever."

"So, who knows?" Ron asked.

"Fred and George found out. Tonks..."

"Tonks?" Ron asked.

"She was my watcher this summer," Harry said shaking his head. "And after the accident, well, your dad."

"My dad knows too? Merlin's beard, Harry, half the world knows and you wanted to keep it secret from me?"

"She's a Muggle, Ron," he repeated. "I wasn't sure what to expect."

"It's not the only thing you're hiding Harry, is it?" His voice had a slight edge to it.

"Well, Ron," Harry snapped back, "I suspect we both have our little secrets, don't we." His voice was becoming heated. Ron took to his feet, he looked torn.

"I'm... I'm not the one who nearly died and won't tell anybody about it!" he yelled.

"Aren't you?" Harry rose to his feet. They were toe-to-toe. "Aren't you?" he repeated pitching his voice to match Ron's. "Brain-boy! You may enjoy slurping other people's thoughts Ron, but you can stay out of my head!" Ron's face instantly fell.

"I don't need this," he said shoving Harry aside and leaving the room.

"I don't need it either!" Harry called after him. He dropped back to his bed. "I don't want any of it," he whispered to himself. For a moment he looked to the door. Ron was sick, and he'd used it to his advantage. "The one friend you've got, Harry," he thought, "you're a jackass." He got up to go apologize, and realized he still had the letter in his hand. He sat back down in the chair, pulling his right sleeve up. There was no mark. He slipped open the letter and took a deep breath.

Harry,

(His name had a little heart around it.)

I miss you too. Your mirror is keeping me company and so are those two other little things I've hidden away in my wonderful box. Life's been rather dull around Privet Drive. A bit of good news--Duncan's decided to stay on and finish school, even though Emma was determined to leave. He says what's good for Harry is what's good for him. I spoke with Mama this morning. I haven't told her about Hedwig, yet. I just asked your question. She seemed fascinated by the whole symbology.

Two lightning bolts crossed are most commonly linked to the Tibetan symbol for the Viswa Vajra representing that which cannot be destroyed, but destroys all evil. The snake may represent lightning as well, the flow of energy, which creates us and makes us alive. Mama calls it the divine energy, or life force in us all. She also mentioned the Khadga, a sword that first destroys ignorance to then allow enlightenment.

I'd like to think there's a life force that binds you to me Harry. The way I see it, one step closer to school, is one step closer to the end of school, and that's one step closer to me.

Be strong, Harry. I love you,

Gabriella

He folded the note and looked at his arm again. Still nothing. He closed his eyes and fancied the two of them connected by an invisible beam of energy. He saw her face before him and the twinkle in her eyes. He smiled putting the note in his pocket. Thoughts of Gabriella and the summer lightened Harry's heart. He made up his mind; Ron was right. "Time to destroy a little ignorance," he thought. He stood and climbed the stairs.

As he made his way to the upper story, he once again heard voices--hushed whispers. He knocked on Ron's door. "Ron?" he called. His knock pushed the door open. There was the familiar sound of a snap just before Harry put his head through. "Can I come..." he stopped, horror struck. Ron was sitting at the foot of his bed, his shirt off, and his back toward Harry. "My god," he whispered.

The scarring Harry had only glimpsed earlier in the day was now laid out before him. Ron made no effort to move. "You said it was getting better?" he gasped, slowly walking to Ron's bedside.

"It's been a hard day, Harry," he said with a deep breath. "Diagon Alley, and then tonight." The scars were darker and deeper than earlier in the day. The small strip running from Ron's tailbone weaved its way up his back like a twisted root, branching out from his spine into a network of tinier scars. Finally, the system made its way to the nape of his neck where it seemed to disappear into a circle the size of a galleon. "There were so many voices today."

"Does it hurt?" Harry asked, holding out his finger but resisting the temptation to touch.

“No,” Ron said simply. “It must look hideous.” There was a long moment of silence. Harry felt his mind being forced back to Privet Drive. Ron was trying to reach in. Unwillingly, images of the pool began to flash in his mind, and then his birthday party. Suddenly, the pain was back in his arm again. He reached for his scar and could feel the razor-thin etching lift from the surface of his skin.

“Ron!” Harry yelled. “Stay out of my head!” The images stopped, but the throbbing remained. Harry sat at Ron’s left side. Ron looked down at his own hands.

“I didn’t mean to...”

“I know, Ron,” Harry said. “Look, this has all been my fault. I was just being a jerk; I’m sorry.” Ron, looking pale and completely drained nodded, but said nothing. There was another long pause. Harry pushed his thumb under his sleeve; the scar was still there. “Ron,” he said, “you were right. I am hiding something. I don’t know why I didn’t show you straight away.” Ron turned to look at him.

Slowly, Harry pulled up the sleeve on his right arm, the fleshy underside pressed flat against his lap. For a moment he paused. He took a deep breath, and then turned the arm over.

Chapter 14 - A New Map

Ron shuddered when he saw the mark on Harry's arm. In an instant he sprang away from Harry, gazing, his eyes wide, his hand held out in front of him pointing madly. "V... Vold... It's the... the..." he sputtered.

"No Ron!" Harry cried. "I knew you'd think that." If Ron was pale before, he was white now. Harry stood up holding his forearm closer so Ron could see. "Look, there's a..." but Ron took a step backward. "I don't believe this," Harry said. He yanked down the sleeve over his arm. "What was I thinking?" Harry turned to leave.

"No, Harry, stop." Breathing hard, Ron was trying to regain his composure. "It's just that," he took another breath, "well... okay..." and another breath. "Now it's my turn to be the jerk. I'm sorry." Ron, slowly took one step toward Harry. "Come on, let's..." he breathed again, "let's have a look." At first Harry was hesitant, but then he walked over to Ron and lifted his sleeve. The scar was gone. Ron was dumfounded. "But, I saw it, a snake and a knife, or something."

Harry sighed. "I don't understand either," he answered. "It was there when I first took off the bandages. I was going to show you then, but it vanished. You thought I was joking around." He rubbed his forearm. "I wish I was." Harry leaned back against the wall. "It popped out after we saw Malfoy today. You knew something was up, didn't you? I sensed you then."

"Yes," Ron whispered. "I guess I'm sorry for that too." Harry just shook his head.

"I told you, I understand."

"But what is it?" Ron pressed. "How did it get there?"

"I don't know, Ron," Harry said desperately. "Maybe it was somebody at the hospital."

"Why would they put the mark of the Death Eaters on your..."

"It's NOT the mark of the Death Eaters! It's some sort of symbol; I'm sure of it. But how, or why, I've yet to learn." Harry began to lightly rub his finger up and down against his arm. His eyes looked out into space. "... he will have power the Dark Lord knows not..." he whispered.

"What?" Ron asked. Harry looked back down to his arm.

"I think... it's about power Ron. The question is, what kind?" Ron simply looked confused. It was well past midnight and the two were both exhausted. "I better get back to bed," Harry said. "We can talk more tomorrow. Still, I'd like to hold off telling Hermione just yet." Ron looked up.

"Think she'll turn you into a lab rat do you?" Ron asked. Harry nodded. "Yeah, I understand. She knows about my back, but I haven't said anything about the voices." Ron looked very uncomfortable. "Still Harry, we're going to have to tell her sooner or later. We owe her that. Maybe when we get to school?" Harry simply shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if it pops up again, I'd like to get a proper look." Harry made his way to the door.

"Ron? When I came in... there were voices. Fred and George?" Ron rubbed the back of his neck twirling his finger around the edge of the circular scar.

"Uh, yeah... Fred and George," Ron said, looking away from Harry. "They just popped out before you came in. I think they went to say goodbye downstairs and, er, headed out the front door."

"Sure," said Harry with a thin smile, wondering what the truth was. "It's late Ron. I'm calling it a night. Sleep well."

"You too, mate," Ron answered.

Harry returned to his room to sleep, knowing full well neither of them would close their eyes for quite some time.

Over the next ten days the four Hogwarts students, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Harry often found themselves alone at Grimmauld Place.

They spent most of their time cleaning the last vestiges of the Black household. Harry decided to keep quite a few things that he thought Sirius might want. Why, he didn't know. He saved the Black family tapestry, portraits of his better-behaved relatives, and the odd collection of golden instruments shelved in the study for which not even Moody knew their use.

Ron seemed to do well with so few people around. The voices had subsided at night. Neither of them had found it the right time to talk to Hermione. The occasional wizard or witch made their way to visit Arthur and Molly Weasley in the evenings. As before, they were not allowed to participate in the Order's meetings. Dumbledore had never stopped by; he was still overseas garnering support for the cause. From the snippets of information that Harry and the others overheard, he had been marginally successful.

Harry had exchanged a few letters with Gabriella. He decided to be upbeat and positive, and spoke of the summer to come. Remembering Grigor's words to him, each letter had allowed for Gabriella to choose a path that didn't include Harry: "I'll understand if you don't wait," or "Know I'll always love you wherever our futures might lead." It was his effort to let her make her own choice. It was clear to Harry, however, she had chosen to be with him. Just knowing that made facing the upcoming year bearable.

His scar had only returned twice. Once after a nightmare he had that he couldn't remember. He'd fallen off his bed, sweating, his heart racing. The pain in his arm told him it had returned. The second time was during an argument he had with Hermione. She was becoming insistent he tell someone that he could perform magic without a wand. Harry was halfway through his argument why nobody must know, when the pain shot down his arm again.

One afternoon, having just finished lunch, Harry found himself in the entryway when the door opened. It was Snape. He hadn't been to Grimmauld Place all summer and Harry never thought to ask what Snape had been slithering at. Certainly spying for the order, up to his neck in Death Eater activities. How much did he really enjoy it?

Snape took off a heavy black cloak. "Insanity in this heat," Harry thought, as Snape hung it on a rack near the door. He spun around toward the kitchen when he saw Harry. For a moment he froze, his eyes shrinking to two black dots framed by his greasy hairline. A thin false smile appeared on his face.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," he said in a sickeningly sweet voice. "I understand we'll be seeing much more of each other this year. Although, how you convinced Professor Marchbanks during your O.W.L.S. that you could mix more than water and ice is beyond me."

"I'm sorry," Harry replied in a truly sincere and apologetic voice. The look on Snape's face was palatable. Certainly this was not the response he expected.

"Sorry?" he asked. "Sorry, for what?"

"That you won't be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts," Harry said keeping his voice level and smooth. "I guess Professor Dumbledore found someone more qualified. Who is it?" The reaction was exactly as Harry had hoped. Snake's lips pursed and his eyebrows furrowed.

"You'll discover that soon enough," he snapped. "I have business to attend to. Is Arthur Weasley here?"

"Why, yes, sir," Harry said emphasizing his politeness.

"Then where is he, Potter?" Snape snapped again.

"Well, Professor," said Harry, deliberately being slow, "I... I believe he's downstairs, er..." The door to the kitchen popped open. It was Mr. Weasley.

"Ah! Severus," he called. "I thought I heard voices. The meeting has started, if you can break away from Harry." The look of exasperation spread across Snape's face as he left to the kitchen, flashing a stabbing glare at Harry just before he disappeared behind the door.

"Why do you hate him so?" rang a voice from above his head. It was Hermione standing on the second floor landing. Harry looked up at her.

"Hate is such a strong word, don't you think?" he quipped. "It's more like I wish he'd never been born." He ascended the stairs. "Or maybe, it's just that I'd like to see him get a big fat kiss from a Dementor." He passed her heading to his room. "Then, I'd truly have a wonderful thought to help summon a Patronus."

"Harry," she followed, "you don't mean that."

"Don't I?" he called continuing to climb the stairs. "He hates me because my father teased him. What an adult role model! If Malfoy ever spawns some kind of vermin, let it be said now, that, as horrible as that thought is, I won't assume his kids are as evil and self-centered as their father." He walked into his room closing the door behind him. Hermione, undaunted, opened it and entered right behind him.

"He's on our side, Harry," she said trying to convince him of what he already knew.

"And this matters to me because...?" he asked rhetorically.

"Because," she started, "because Dumbledore won't be around forever, Harry."

"Okay Hermione, I'm lost. I just had a wonderful lunch and perfectly spiteful conversation with Snape, which I won't add, and now you're getting all mystical on me."

"Who do you think is going to lead us in the battle against Voldemort? Dumbledore?" It was an odd question, he thought

"Of course Dumbledore," he said not really taking the time to think about it.

"If Dumbledore was able to defeat Voldemort, why didn't he when he had the chance? Instead, at his first opportunity, he let you face

Voldemort for the Sorcerer's stone, why? Why not finish him off when he came to save you?" Harry walked to look out his window. "And what about last year? Don't you think it odd that he let you face Voldemort again, before coming to your rescue, only to let Voldemort slip away again?" There was a long pause, but Harry said nothing. The sun was dropping in the sky, another warm day, but Harry felt a chill. Hermione lowered her voice and walked up close behind him. "It's you Harry, you who have to defeat Voldemort. I don't know why, but it's the only explanation." Harry's eyes searched for a cloud, but only blue sky returned his gaze. He was searching for something to say, some way to deflect her thinking, some way to turn the conversation, but every move he could make he knew would fail with Hermione. She put her hand on his shoulder. "It's as if he's putting you at risk, only to save you... I don't understand." An airplane crossed the sky, leaving in its wake a large golden contrail flaming golden-yellow against the deepening pure blue.

"Because I'm not ready; not yet," he whispered. Hermione turned him to her. She put her arms around him and he buried his face in her shoulder. She said nothing.

"I couldn't even stop Bellatrix." He began to tremble. "How will I ever be able..."

"Shhh," she whispered. "He won't let it happen until the time is right." Together, they embraced by the window as the contrail spread against the blue sky turning a bright orange above Grimmauld Place. After some time, the door to Harry's room opened. It was Ron. Quickly, Harry dropped his arms, but Hermione held fast. Then, slowly, she let go, placing one hand on the side of Harry's face. "You know, don't you? It's not just you, Harry. It never has been and it never will be." He nodded.

"Erm, everything okay, mate?" Ron asked. Harry turned to the window wiping his sleeve across his face and then, making the effort to smile, glanced back at Ron.

"Yeah," Harry said, "yeah, everything's going to be fine."

“Well, good, uh... he’s here.” Ron looked back over his shoulder. “And he wants to see you.”

“Who?” Harry asked. But at that moment the door behind Ron opened wide.

“I think I can take it from here, Mr. Weasley.” Professor Dumbledore walked into the room.

“Dumbledore!” Hermione yelled and ran to give him a hug. Harry, instead, turned to look out the window.

“It’s wonderful to see you, too, Miss Granger! I hear you had an adventurous summer together.” Harry took note, but continued to stare at the reddening sky. For a moment, his mind turned to Privet Drive. “I’m sorry,” Dumbledore continued, “but if you two would excuse us, I have some things to discuss with Harry.” His voice was kind, but the words were heavy. Harry felt as if he was being summoned to speak with Mr. Darbinyan. The evening breeze was picking up. Warm on Harry’s face, it stung his damp eyes. He listened as Ron and Hermione excused themselves, and heard the door to his room shut, leaving him alone with Dumbledore. Still he faced the darkening sky.

“Hello, Harry.” The words were soft and inviting, but Harry stood stoic, silently looking for the first star of the evening. There was a small sigh, and then, “I see.” He could hear Dumbledore sit down perhaps in his chair, or on his bed, Harry didn’t care. “And your summer, Harry? Was it eventful?” There was another long pause. “Tell me, Harry, is the Wizarding world so cold that you did not feel it would allow you to love another?” The words cut to the bone. Harry placed both hands on the bottom of the window trying to take in deep breaths. “Is there no one you can trust with your heart?” The air in Harry’s lungs was gone. The visit from Snape and the thought of what he’d given up to be here was fresh in his mind. Still staring out the window, his knuckles whitened as he clenched the sill.

“Why?” Harry asked. The question was syrupy and biting. “Do I need more lessons on love from Professor Snape?” It was Dumbledore’s turn not to answer. Harry continued to look out the window. “Or

maybe... I could talk to Mom and Dad? Oh wait! They're dead, aren't they--killed by a wizard." Harry's lungs were heaving. "Or maybe I could talk to my godfather? Oh no! He's dead too--killed by a witch." Harry's nails dug into the wood of Grimmauld Place. "Why would I think the Wizarding world was cold, Headmaster? There's all of my classmates at school. Except they think I'm some sort of parselmouth freak with a scar. There's the Ministry of Magic, but they'd rather see me expelled from the Wizarding world than save their pitiful lives. How about the world of public opinion, the Dailey Prophet? No... they'd sooner see me in a straight jacket and carted off to Azkaban to be with those most lovely of creatures--Dementors. And I guess it would be unwise to turn to the Slytherins, or the Death Eaters, or Voldemort himself--they just want me dead!" Pain was searing down his right arm. "Why, sir... why would I think the Wizarding world was loveless and cold?"

Harry turned to face Dumbledore. Tears were streaming down his defiant face. Dumbledore was seated in the chair by his bed, facing away. Harry pressed on, "I've left my heart and soul on Privet Drive, and I've come back to Grimmauld Place to kill or be killed. That's all there is to it. And the sooner it's over and done, the better." He leaned against the wall and slid to the floor hiding his face in his crossed arms. He was spent, an empty shell. For three weeks he'd been going through the motions with Ron, Hermione and all the rest, but that was all. His mind had always been turned to two things: Gabriella, and how it would end. Not thinking, he rubbed his right arm.

"No Harry, I think you've brought your soul with you. And, I'm afraid, you wear your heart on your sleeve." It was Dumbledore's turn to walk to the window. "I've been all over the world this summer, Harry, and I must admit you may be right. I did not find much warmth." The curtains on the window fluttered in the breeze as Dumbledore's shoulders slumped. "Most of those coming to our aid do so for their own selfish reasons. Very few, I'd say, feel they need to stop Voldemort to secure the safety of others. The safety of non-magic folk, of course, is their least concern, and yet for me it is our highest priority." Dumbledore walked back to the chair, turned it to face Harry, and sat back down.

“So, what are we to do then, Harry,” he asked, “you and I? Should we leave it as it is? Should we let Voldemort have his way with the world? Is the world so hopeless it should be wiped clean again?” Harry’s mind turned to the people at his birthday party... a rainbow of colors all getting along, willing to help those less fortunate or in need. He looked up at Dumbledore for the first time, and shook his head no. Dumbledore leaned back in the chair.

“I wouldn’t be so hasty,” the old wizard said with a sigh. His eyes were off somewhere, Harry thought, and they looked old, very old. “Do you really think there’s good enough in the world to try and save it? Good enough in the Muggle world? Good enough in the Wizarding world?” His eyes returned to meet Harry’s.

Harry paused and then whispered, “Yes.” Dumbledore shook his head and held up his hand.

“Harry, until the day comes when you can open your hand to those you despise the most, when you can open your doors and admit those who you’d sooner shun, Voldemort will have won.” Again, Dumbledore stood and walked to the window.

“I see by looking into your eyes you’ve been practicing. On your own?” Harry was tired. He simply nodded his head. “Of course you have,” said Dumbledore, his breath on the wind. “This afternoon, I met with Professor Snape downstairs. He holds tremendous hatred towards your father and has transferred it to you. We spoke of this last year. It’s quite simple, really. He’s not evil. He’s not deceitful. He simply had a miserable life as a child and thought Hogwarts would make it all better. But Hogwarts, in many ways, made it worse.” His words were remorseful, and again he returned to the chair. It was almost as if he were pacing back and forth not sure where to go. “Tell me, Harry. You know Professor Snape’s faults. You’ve seen them first-hand for what they are. Is it not possible to forgive them?” Harry’s head snapped up, only to see two kind, light-blue eyes return their glare.

“Forgive them?” he choked. “Forgive Snape?”

“Professor Snape,” Dumbledore returned quietly.

“And what kindness, what reason does he give me to forgive him?”

“None,” Dumbledore said flatly. There was a smile on his face and a warmth in his eyes that was melting the ice around Harry’s heart. For some moments the two sat there, eye-to-eye until Harry rose to his feet and walked behind Dumbledore.

“Yes,” he whispered and then stronger, “I can forgive him.” Dumbledore stood to face Harry.

“It is easy to say the words, Harry. It is harder to put them into action. Consider all those around you that you despise.” Dumbledore paused as Harry’s mind began to turn the words over in his mind. And then Dumbledore began, “The Dursleys, Wormtail, Malcolm Smelt, Kreacher, Mr. Darbinyan, and perhaps even Draco Malfoy.” Harry stood stunned at the list of names. “None of them deserve your hatred, Harry. What’s more, the day will come when we will need many of these people, and more, to help us in the fight against Voldemort.” He walked close to Harry and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Would it be possible to forgive them all without being asked?” He didn’t pause for an answer. “When you can,” he walked to the door, “you will have accomplished that which I could not. You’ll have tapped into the true power that lies within each of us. On that day, you’ll be ready, Harry, and you’ll know it.” As he opened the door to leave, he turned and faced Harry. His face was troubled.

“Harry,” he asked, “at the accident in Little Whinging, you didn’t have your wand?”

“No, sir.” Harry felt his face redden, but the words were honest. Dumbledore’s face fell further.

“It may be that the charm we spoke of last year is fading. I would not have thought it possible, but Tom has his ways. If that is the case, it would be wise for you to return here next summer.” Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore interrupted. “We will have time enough to discuss this further. I know where your mind is turned, Harry.” His eyes twinkled and a smile splashed across his face. “We will find a way, son.” And he left.

Again, Harry found himself alone. But no sooner had the thought of isolation entered his mind, it was thrust aside as the door to his room slammed open. Ron was first with Hermione and Ginny close on his heels.

“Well, mate,” he panted out of breath, “what did he say?” Harry couldn’t help but smile at the bounding energy that had just burst in.

“Come on, Harry,” chimed in Ginny. “Out with it, and don’t say he met with you alone to talk about your class schedule!”

“That’s right, Harry,” added Ron. “Blimey, he’s never even met with any of the Order one-on-one.” Suddenly a thought crossed Harry’s mind.

“Are they still here?” he asked. “Is the meeting still on?”

“Well, yes,” said Hermione. “Dumbledore left just now, and a few are still in the kitchen. It’s just that...” But Harry was already out the door.

He raced down the steps, hearing the front door slam shut. From the lower landing he saw Mr. Weasley. “Who just left?” called Harry. Mr. Weasley looked up to Harry.

“Alastor, why?”

“No reason,” Harry said. His pace slowed as he walked toward the kitchen. “The meeting’s over?”

“Yes,” Mr. Weasley responded gazing at the three others on Harry’s trail. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Mr. Weasley,” answered Harry. “What’s for dinner?” Mr. Weasley was wise enough to be suspicious and curious enough to play the game.

“Molly’s making meatballs,” he said. As the words left Mr. Weasley’s mouth, Harry entered the kitchen closely followed by all of them. Ginny, one eye and ear on Harry, offered to help her mother. Ron

was at her side. At the table, Tonks was reading some papers. Harry expected her to fold them up as Hermione approached, but she didn't. Instead she turned them so Hermione could have a better look, and the two women began talking in hushed whispers. Remus and Snape were standing in the far corner speaking amicably, but seemed to stop as Harry walked over to them.

"I don't mean to interrupt," he said, "but I thought the meeting was over."

"You are and it is," said Snape shortly. "Remus, we can finish this discussion later, I must be getting on."

"Won't you stay for dinner, sir?" The words were Harry's and in as normal a tone as he could make them. He made every effort to be sincere. Snape glanced at Mrs. Weasley at the stove and then back to Harry.

"I think not, Potter," he replied. Almost as if someone had given Harry a new map to Professor Snape's face, he could see from his expression that he would rather stay. "Some of us have work to do," he quipped and left the kitchen.

Harry alone followed him to the front door. His insides were churning over what to say, or how to phrase it. It seemed hopeless to say anything that Snape would not take as an insult. Parts of him wanted to spit in his face for how he'd treated Harry all these years, while others wanted to apologize for what his father had done to Snape when they were students. Snape reached for the handle on the door when Harry finally opened his mouth.

"Sir?"

"What is it now, Potter?" The voice was filled with vitriol.

"You... you forgot your cloak, sir." Harry walked over to the rack by the door, took the cloak from off its hook and handed it to Snape. Suddenly, Snape became very uncomfortable, at a loss for words.

"Yes, well, thank you, Potter."

“You’re welcome,” said Harry with a warm smile.

As Snape left, Harry smelled the wonderful aroma of meatballs and turned to hear the laughter of family and friends. The smile on his face remained as he walked back to the kitchen and whispered, “One step closer to being ready, Tom.”

Chapter 15 - Blood on the Hogwarts Express

Save for the flicker of candlelight dancing off the walls, the room was dark. Harry was sitting on the edge of the bed; Gabriella was rubbing his back. He was looking down at his forearm tracing the sharp cuts of the snake's head and the two crossed lightning-bolts. Her hands were warm as they stroked the hair at the back of his neck.

"It'll be okay, you know," she whispered.

"As long as I'm with you, everything's okay," he smiled and then turning to her they kissed. Her hair hung down around her neck, a silver lightning bolt glinted the candlelight from below her ear. Her black eyes were twinkling and her smile captivating. His gaze took her in. "You're so beautiful, have I told you?"

"Yes," she grinned. "And have I told you how handsome you are?" She stroked his face bringing a finger down to the cleft on his chin.

"No, I don't think so," he smiled.

"I especially like your snake," she said taking his arm in her hand and kissing his new scar, and then pecking at his arm up to his neck. She nibbled at his ear until he started laughing and pushed her away.

"Stop," he smiled, "that tickles." He stood up and walked over to the mirror. He looked at his bare chest and flexed like a muscle-builder. "Not bad I'd say," he joked.

"Not at all," she replied standing up behind him and grabbing him by the waist. "Although it's your eyes that do me in. I like red eyes."

"Red eyes?" he asked. He glanced back to the mirror. There he stood with Gabriella holding him from behind smiling. But shining back at him were two red eyes. His heart skipped, for as he stared, his appearance once again began to change. His hair thinned as his face flattened. The red eyes became more snakelike and his nose disappeared into two thin slits. "Voldemort," he whispered.

"I've always loved your eyes, My Lord." The voice was thin; the hands now claw-like around his stomach. In the mirror behind him was Bellatrix Lestrange.

"NO!" he screamed. The room began to spin. He was surrounded by Death Eaters in dark cloaks. They were closing in on him.

"What is it My Lord?" they called. This wasn't Gabriella's room; hands were grabbing him; it was somewhere else. "What is it?" he heard again. They were shaking him. A farmhouse? "What is it Harry?"

He woke from the dream to find himself on the floor next to his bed at Grimmauld Place. Ron had him about the shoulders.

"Harry, you were screaming. Is it, is it happening again?" His eyes were filled with fear. For a moment Harry didn't move trying to take in that the here and now was real. "It's back," Ron breathed. Harry looked down to see the scar on his arm raised and red. "It's a snake Harry!" His voice was shaky.

"Yes," Harry returned waiting for the room to stop spinning, "and a sword, and this," he pointed to the base of the handle, "two lightning bolts. That's not an evil symbol, Ron. It's a symbol to destroy evil, or ignorance... I don't know." Ron helped Harry back onto his bed.

"It's not the Dark Mark?" he asked again.

"You saw it in the sky, didn't you?" Harry was becoming irritated. "That's what blazes black on the arms of the Death Eaters! Does this look like that?" Harry shot his arm out in front of Ron. Ron didn't need to look again.

"No, Harry, I'm sorry." Just then there was a knock and Hermione came into the room. Harry quickly covered his arm with the sheet.

"Come on you two! Mrs. Weasley has breakfast ready, and then it's off to the train." She looked around at Harry's room. He'd only made half an attempt to pack the night before. "I can't believe you two are just sitting around talking, when you've so much to do! Well, I'm not helping do you hear me? Harry, get dressed and get down to

breakfast or Ron's mom will go through the roof! We only have a couple hours." They heard her footsteps descend the stairs outside. Ron stood up.

"I'm already packed. I'll give you a hand after we eat," he offered. You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, just a nightmare, that's all," Harry answered slipping on his glasses, but he was still trembling.

"Harry, you can skip breakfast if you want. I'll tell Mum you're a bit ill."

"No. I'm fine, really. Just give me a minute to get dressed." Harry took a deep breath. "I'll be okay." He walked over to his trunk picking some things off the floor along the way. Ron hesitated and then left him.

Harry walked by the mirror to his room, and for a moment was afraid to look at himself. Finally, he took in his reflection. It was just Harry looking back. He bent nearer to the mirror staring closely at his eyes. The same green he had always seen flashed back at him. He took off his glasses and stared even closer, concentrating. "It was Voldemort," he thought, "Voldemort's eyes." It was as if he was in a trance, galvanized by his own gaze, oblivious to the world around him. And then the green began to change. He didn't blink as the color turned almost brown, then yellow. The pupils began to thin as the color went orange, and then red. Still he gazed intently. "I can see you Tom," he whispered. The door to his room opened.

"You coming, mate?" Ron called. Harry quickly turned away, shielding his face.

"Uh, yeah, just a few more minutes." His voice was hoarse and high.

"Well, she's served everyone else. You don't have too many more." Ron again left the room and Harry quickly dressed.

"What were you thinking, you idiot!" he whispered to himself. He looked back to the mirror. The green had returned. "Oh! Aren't we lucky! What if they had stayed that way?" he yelled at his reflection. He looked to his arm and the scar too had faded to oblivion. "What is

going on Harry?" He put on his trainers shaking his head. "I wish Tonks were here," he whispered.

When Harry walked into the kitchen he found it somewhat crowded. Remus was speaking with Arthur Weasley in the corner. Sturgis and Alastor were seated with Ron, Hermione and Ginny. Mrs. Weasley was at the stove, and when he walked closer, her brow furled. He was expecting admonition, but instead saw concern.

"Harry, what's wrong?" With a flick of her wand the pans stopped moving and the flames lowered. She walked over to him and held her hand to his forehead. "You're white as a ghost! Ron, why didn't you say he was ill?" She took Harry by the arm. "Come over here dear... sit down." She escorted Harry to a spot adjacent to Sturgis Podmore.

"Honestly, Mrs. Weasley, I'm fine," Harry pleaded. "I just didn't sleep well is all."

"Let me get you some tea," she said as Sturgis put his hand to Harry's forehead.

"Listen to Molly boy, she'll do you right," he winked. A moment later, Mrs. Weasley had a cup of tea and a small plate of food.

"Here, dear, try to eat a little something."

"Where's Tonks?" Harry asked scanning the room.

"Oh, she's been extremely busy lately," Mr. Weasley answered, "You'll see her soon enough. Now, try and eat. I don't want you to miss the first day, if you can help it, and we only have about an hour until the cars arrive."

Harry tried to eat. He felt as if everyone were watching him... bite by bite. "Your last meal," he thought, "before execution." But worse than that was the creeping feeling that this would take him one step further from Gabriella. Was it even possible to change his mind? Dumbledore said that they would find a way, but how Harry couldn't imagine. Finally, Harry lost his appetite completely.

"I better pack," he said. Ron and Hermione stood up to join him.

"There's one more thing, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, "before you go." He stood silent for a moment and then brought the words to his mouth. "Buckbeak. We could let him go now if you wish, but I think it wiser to wait for the darkness of night. I can release him when I get home." Harry simply nodded. He had spent time every day with the creature, but this morning he couldn't find the courage to say goodbye.

Despite her earlier protestations, Hermione, along with Ron, helped Harry pack. He noticed her take note of the dragonhead in his trunk. She read the inscription, looked at Harry, and when she saw his glance decided not to ask and simply placed it in his trunk.

The Ministry provided two cars that expanded to fit everyone quite comfortably. Harry noticed that they were somewhat nicer than the one's he had been in before. Mad-Eye went in the first car with Arthur, Ginny and Hermione. Sturgis and Mrs. Weasley rode with Harry and Ron. Remus stayed behind. His final words to Harry were simply, "Trust in Dumbledore."

They arrived early to the station and it was fortunate they did. It was more crowded than Harry had ever seen it. Teenagers were everywhere. It was evident from their attire that some sort of school competition was going on. The adults left the cars first and then called the others out. They gathered their trunks and gear and were slowly making their way to Platform 9-3/4s. Mad-Eye was fit to be tied.

"This is bloody insane!" he yelled. "Let's take him back and fly him in tonight."

"Shhh," hushed Mrs. Weasley, "They'll hear you."

"They can't hear a bloody thing!" he yelled back. And he was right. The competition turned out to be a band competition. Different schools were hoisting banners with #1 or CHAMPS on them. Many of the students were playing their instruments: trumpets, flutes, and drums. The place was a madhouse and the guards were having a terrible time trying to control this many students in one place.

When they reached Platform 6, a small fight broke out between two rival schools. One kid was using his drumsticks to attack someone in a tiger mascot suit. In seconds, three kids wearing orange and black were pummeling the drummer.

“Stay close!” Arthur Weasley yelled. But it was difficult moving all the gear they had through the melee. Moody and Mrs. Weasley started moving ahead with Hermione and Ginny. Suddenly an entire marching band cut in front of Harry, Ron, Mr. Weasley and Sturgis. By the time the group cleared, the others were ahead, and out of sight.

“Arthur,” Sturgis yelled, “take the point. I’ll watch from back here.” They had just made it past Platform 7 when Harry heard a distant voice calling his name. He looked around, but shook his head. Was he imagining it? They made it a few feet further, when he heard it again, this time closer. Harry stopped to scan the crowd, but it was impossible to see further than five feet.

Again they pressed on, making their way through a sea of multi-colored competitors. Suddenly something, someone, hit Harry from the side. He tried to gain his balance, but his foot stepped back on his trolley and he tumbled over backward, held tight by the assailant. Ron saw the attack and pulled for his wand, but Mr. Weasley grabbed him by the arm and held him fast. Harry was flat on his face, and when he turned over he saw who was holding him tight--Gabriella Darbinyan.

Her eyes were on fire, and a smile that could span the ocean splashed on her face. She grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him hard. “I thought I’d never find you in this madness,” she said and kissed him again.

“Gabriella?” Harry stammered. “You’re here, but, but how?” If it were possible her smile widened further.

“Don’t be silly,” she said helping him to his feet. “You told me Harry, at least about King’s Cross. I was able to get the day from Fred the night they packed your gear. He said you’d be leaving today at 11 o’clock sharp. I wasn’t sure. When they said no train left at eleven, I

thought... but I... I found you!" And she wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. And, as if rekindled anew, Harry held her fast to him.

"You're brilliant! Have I ever told you that?" he smiled. A silver lightning bolt dangled from her ear. Her hand stroked his hair and held his face.

"You're ill," she said. "What's wrong?" He looked into her eyes and could feel the tears well up in his own. It was his turn to press his lips to hers.

"Nothing now," he grinned.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley called. "We really must be going. We have some time, but not too much." Ron stood next to his father a bit stunned by what he was seeing. Gabriella looked over at him.

"You must be Fred & George's brother." Ron's mouth dropped open. "I hope you're not as cheeky as they are," she smiled.

"This, Gabriella," introduced Harry, "is my best friend and classmate, Ron Weasley." Gabriella took Ron by the hand.

"I take it that you're an incurable criminal too?" she joked. Ron just stood gazing. "Doesn't say much, does he?" she said to Harry.

"This is Ron's father, Mr. Weasley, and this is another friend Mr. Podmore." Sturgis held out his hand to Gabriella.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance my dear," he bowed. Her eyes held his and her head tilted slightly to one side.

"Have we met before?" she asked.

"It is possible," Sturgis replied, "I've been to many places."

"Really Harry," Mr. Weasley again reminded, "we must be going." They began to inch their way to Platform 9-3/4s. Harry turned to Gabriella.

"They're right, we have to go." His face had fallen.

"I'll see you on to the train," she said brightly looking down at her watch.. "Just a few more minutes." Harry pushed his way between two tuba players shaking his head.

"You can't. It's, uh, well... it's a special train for, you know, criminals. They won't let you on. They don't even want you to see it." He stopped in front of a bass drum. "You'd better leave from here," he said as he took her hand. Gabriella looked down. A tear fell on Harry's sleeve. "No... no, please don't cry," he said taking her cheek in his hand. "This... this was wonderful." He held her as a swirl of colors blurred by. The day was warm and the sky an azure blue. For the first time since he'd left Privet Drive, Harry felt warm inside. He looked deep into her black eyes.

"Thank you," he said, "for giving me my soul back." He held her tight, and then whispered in her ear, "But keep my heart safe in your special box." They kissed once again, and then Harry turned to leave.

"When will I see you?" she yelled.

"Soon! I promise." Harry yelled back.

"Christmas?"

"Christmas!" he called, and in an instant Gabriella disappeared in a mass of colored uniforms.

They made it to the platform without too much struggle. Harry kept glancing back to see if he could see her, but she had gone. The four of them slipped through the gate and out to the platform where the Hogwart's Express blew steam into the air. Mad-Eye was waiting as they came through.

"I was just about to go back and check on you. She leaves in ten minutes. What took you so long?"

“Just crowded, Alastor,” replied Mr. Weasley. “Just crowded, that’s all.”

Mrs. Weasley walked over with Hermione and gave Ron and Harry a hug.

“Be careful, all three of you, do you hear me?” She was on the verge of tears.

“Don’t we always Mum?” Ron grinned.

“Your mother’s right,” added Mr. Weasley. “They’ll be out to get both of you this year. Keep your eyes open, and don’t wander off alone. Is that clear!” They both nodded. “Hermione, do your best to keep them out of trouble, will you?”

“I suspect that will be impossible Mr. Weasley,” she smiled. “But I’ll do my best.” She hugged Mr. Weasley goodbye and the three stepped on to the train.

“Where’s Ginny?” Harry asked.

“She found Dean, or he found her. He saved her a seat in one of the compartments.” Ron went scarlet.

“Dean?” he yelled. “Dean? She’s not here five minutes and he’s already making a move.”

“Oh, get over it Ron,” Hermione sighed. “He made that move ages ago.” There was an awkward pause, as she stood next to Ron, looked down at her shoes and then back up to Harry.

“I know, I know,” he said. “You’ve got to go to the prefect carriage. Don’t worry, I’ll manage.” Ron and Hermione headed up the corridor as visions of last year’s train fiasco filled Harry’s mind.

Once again he had arrived late, and once again all the compartments had been taken. He was about to give up hope when he knocked and entered what felt like the last compartment on the train. It was filled with Ravenclaws. Three sat on one side, Padma Patil, Anthony

Goldstein, and a small kid Harry didn't recognize. On the other side were Marietta Edgecombe and Cho Chang. Cho was reading a book, and as she looked up her eyes brightened.

"Harry!" she smiled.

"Uh, the train's pretty packed, I was wondering if..."

"Sure," Cho rang out. "Here, let me give you a hand with that." She reached to help Harry with his trunk, and her hand touched his as they placed it in an overhead compartment. "You can sit here." She slid over a bit next to Marietta, but seemed to deliberately crowd Harry's side a bit more. Harry sat.

"Harry," Cho smiled, "I'd like you to meet my brother, Jim." Sitting directly across from Harry was a thin, black-haired boy with round glasses, much like his own. "This is Jim's first year." The wisp of a child held out his hand to Harry, and Harry took it in his own. The shake was firm and the smile affable. Harry was finding it hard to believe that he was ever that young.

"Good to meet you Jim," Harry said. "Are you excited about school?" Jim nodded but seemed too nervous to speak. "Got your wand?" Again he nodded, and then from inside the vest he was wearing he pulled a holly wand about ten inches long. Harry pulled out his wand as Jim's eyes widened. Harry smiled. "That's a great wand, mine's holly too." A grin grew across Jim's face and finally he spoke.

"Thanks," he said. "I picked it out at Ollivander's, or as he says, it picked me."

"That's where I bought mine," Harry replied.

"Strange man, Mr. Ollivander," Jim continued, "I've never seen...." And he went on and on for quite some time. Telling everyone in the compartment about his wand-buying experience, and how he couldn't decide what kind of animal to bring to Hogwarts, and how he really liked Ravenclaw and all, but he thought maybe Gryffindor would be a better house, and how he hadn't had a chance to try his wand out,

and that he wasn't sure holly would be any good, because Cho's was willow, but now he was sure. Cho leaned in to Harry.

"He hasn't said two words since we left the house this morning, Harry," she whispered in his ear. "He's been petrified." And then looking into his eyes, she smiled and said, "Thanks." And Harry felt her slide just a bit closer. His face began to redden.

The six students talked back and forth pleasantly for quite some time. Much of the conversation was about Harry's new broom and Quidditch. By the time the lunch trolley came and went, even Harry and Marietta were getting along. He was finding it about the best trip to Hogwarts he'd ever had. About mid-afternoon the compartment door slid open and Ron stuck his head in.

"There you are!" Ron's eyes first caught Harry's and then he surveyed the rest, taking note that Cho was practically in Harry's lap. "Why aren't you with the Gryffindors?"

"Everything was taken; the train's packed."

"Tell me about it," Ron sighed. "There's a lot of new students this year, parents thinking their kids will be safer at Hogwarts with Dumbledore. It's meant no lunch for the.... Hey! You!" he yelled down the train, "You can't...." and Ron disappeared.

As the afternoon wore on, Harry and many of the others were becoming drowsy. The conversation started to slow and the rhythmic cadence of the train and track soon had Harry asleep.

He was on the beach. The day was warm and the sun bright. He lay on a towel in the sand, his eyes closed.

"You're starting to turn red, do you want some suntan lotion?" she whispered.

"Sure," he smiled. The squirt on his chest was cold, but the hands warm as they spread the lotion across his neck, chest, and down his arms.

“What’s this on your arm? It’s quite exotic,” she said and he felt her lips press to his.

“That? I told you about that in the letter,” Harry answered. He was feeling quite warm.

“What letter?” she asked. The sun was bright in Harry’s face. He held his arm over his brow to shield his eyes. Kneeling beside him with her hand to his chest was Cho.

“Cho?” he stammered.

“Of course, Harry,” she smiled. She bent down to kiss him again. The train jerked and Harry awoke.

He was leaning against the wall of the car with Cho at his side asleep, her head against his shoulder, and her hand holding Harry’s in his lap. His eyes surveyed the car. Everyone else was asleep as well. She had pressed so close to Harry perspiration was beading on his forehead. Still, for a moment he sat there stroking her hand with his. She truly was beautiful. A smile fell across his face and gently he tried to rouse her.

“Cho,” he whispered softly, “Cho.” Slowly her eyes opened, and realizing her position she pulled back releasing Harry’s hand.

“I’m, I’m sorry,” she whispered straightening her hair. And then looking at Harry she moved the hair in his face behind his ear. “That’s a cool earring,” she smiled.

“Yeah, thanks,” Harry smiled back. He then reached to her hand and held it in his. “Cho, you’re the most beautiful girl at Hogwarts.” She blushed. “You’re smart, and athletic, and, well, damn near perfect.” For a moment he held her eyes in his. “It’s just that, well, there’s something you need to know. This summer I...” The door suddenly slid open.

“What’s this Potter?” Malfoy drawled. “The Gryffindors boot you out?” Harry released Cho’s hand and slipped his other behind his back. His

wand had fallen from the back of his pocket and was stuck in the cushion behind him. Cho stood.

“Go back to your snake den Draco,” she hissed.

“Still having the girls do your dirty work, Potter?” he spat. “What’s the matter? Don’t tell me, the famous Harry Potter has wet himself again!” Crabbe and Goyle appeared in the doorway. By this time everyone was awake.

“What’s going on?” Jim asked. Cho put her hand on his shoulder to keep him seated.

“This must be another Chang,” Malfoy pressed. “I can tell by the slant eyes, can’t you Potter? Oh, but you like that sort of disfigurement, don’t you, Potter, being a scarhead and all.” Cho drew her wand, but Malfoy was ready. The spell hit her squarely in the chest and flew her backwards. Her head crashed into the glass of the car window shattering it. Marietta screamed. Padma, Anthony and Jim turned to help. Wind roared into the car as Harry stood in front of Malfoy.

“Uh, Potter, looks like you forgot something,” Malfoy smiled. He was looking down at Harry’s wand lodged in the seat. “This should be easy then. First your girlfriend, and then you. Let’s see how well you can fly out the window without your broom!” He lifted his wand as Harry grabbed him by the collar.

In an instant, Crabbe and Goyle were flying backwards against the other side of the corridor. The door slammed shut sealing Malfoy in. He looked back confused. Still, Harry held tight.

“Tell me Draco,” he hissed through gritted teeth, “do you want forgiveness?”

“Today you’re going to die Potter!” Again he lifted his wand.

“I thought not,” Harry spat, knowing his eyes were growing red. At that moment Draco let out a scream. His wand fell from his hand to the floor. With his left hand Harry was lifting him off the ground. There

was a look of horror on Malfoy's face. "What's the matter, Draco? Your dad's quite used to these eyes."

"P-P-Potter, stop-p it. You're ch-choking me." Malfoy was gasping for air.

"You're not going to die. It's time you understood, Draco." And Harry held his right hand to Malfoy's face. He screamed in agony, piercing everyone's ears. There was a pounding on the door. He could hear Hermione's voice yelling to be let in. Still, Malfoy screamed. Finally, Harry let go, and Malfoy crumpled to the floor. The door slid open as Harry turned to Cho.

"Is she okay?" he gasped. Marietta, tears streaming down her face, was holding Cho in her lap. Blood was splattered across her shirt. Anthony was busy holding his shirt across the back of Cho's head, and trying to heal the wound with his wand. It wasn't stopping the flow of blood.

"It's pretty bad," he said.

"Harry, what's going on?" Hermione yelled stepping over Malfoy, his face to the floor, as she entered the compartment.

She surveyed the scene. "Don't move her!" she yelled and darted into the corridor. Within seconds she appeared with an older, white-haired witch Harry had never seen before. The woman stepped over Malfoy and went to Cho's aid immediately. She was carrying a small box, opening it to reveal a silver sphere. The witch looked at Marietta.

"It's a portkey," she said calmly. "Take her hand dear, on the count of three. One, two, three." In a flash, the witch, Marietta and Cho were gone. Hermione leaned down to Malfoy.

"What happened to him, Harry?" Harry was staring at a puddle of blood on the floor by Anthony's knee when he heard Hermione cry out behind him. He turned to see that she had laid Malfoy on his back. He was still unconscious. She held her hand up to her mouth as she rose looking from Malfoy, and then to Harry. Her eyes caught the tip of Harry's wand jutting out between the seat cushions. "How, Harry?"

she gasped. Harry looked down at his right hand. It was red and blistered. Then he looked at Hermione.

“It’s time he knew,” he said flatly. Ron appeared in the door as Crabbe and Goyle were slowly getting to their feet. The three friends looked back down at Draco Malfoy. The right side of his face was distorted, and red with blisters. But clearly visible in the swollen mass was the thin outline of a sword surrounded by a snake. It was a mark that no magic would ever remove again.

Chapter 16 -- The Sword and the Snake

Hermione bent low to help Malfoy with the blisters that were growing worse on his face, but Crabbe and Goyle pushed her aside. They grabbed Malfoy and trundled the unconscious blonde back to the Slytherin carriages. Ron repaired the window with his wand while Anthony tried to clean the splattered blood as best he could. Padma held her head in her hands, sobbing. Harry had his arm around Cho's brother. Jim held his eyes unblinking at the spot he'd last seen his sister. Harry looked to Hermione.

"Where'd they go?" he asked. "And who was that with Cho?"

"St. Mungo's. And that was a new healer, Mrs. Everett. Professor Dumbledore thought it wise to bring in a few healers to help Madame Pomfrey this year." She looked at Anthony who was shaking so violently his spells were ineffective. Blood still soaked the carriage floor and his shirt. "I guess he was right to think things might be more dangerous. Let me see your hand." He held it out to reveal the blisters that sprang from his wrist to his fingertips, oozing clear liquid. "I really need a potion for this," she said. Then holding out her wand she whispered a spell Harry couldn't hear. The wand emitted a blue-green glow just as had happened on the hospital ward. His hand went cold, the swelling went down and most all the blisters disappeared. She held it in her own. They could hear screaming down the corridor.

"I'll get it," Ron sighed as he left the compartment. Anthony stood up with Padma. He was still shaking, blood dripping from his hands.

"I've... I've got to tell the others what's happened," he said. His jaw became rigid as he clenched his fist. His eyes burned with fury. "Whatever you did to Malfoy, Harry, he deserved it! We'll have every Slytherin's head on a plate before tomorrow morning." And as he stormed out of the compartment, Harry saw the fire begin to rise in Padma's eyes. A moment later she plunged after Anthony.

"Harry, what happened?" Hermione asked. He looked to her eyes and then darted his own to Jim and slowly shook his head. But it was Jim who spoke.

"He... he killed her," he whispered. "That's what's happened."

"No... Jim, she'll be fine," Hermione comforted. "I know she will." But the quiver in her voice revealed her uncertainty.

"I've seen plenty of snakes like him," Jim spat. "They're all the same. Blonde hair, blue eyes and as creative as slugs. 'Hey slant-eyes!' or 'yellow skin, you yellow?' or... or..." his lungs heaved. "Well, he's the snake now isn't he, Harry? You gave him the mark to prove it!" He shuddered and began to cry. Harry held him close.

"The mark?" Hermione whispered.

The train was slowing as it entered Hogsmeade. The shouts down the corridor were growing louder. Through the window, Harry could see in the darkness there was already a commotion starting among students leaving the train. Ron slid open the compartment door. He looked as though he'd been running. At his side was Professor Flitwick.

"This is her brother," Ron panted. Professor Flitwick kneeled down, looked Jim over, and then turned to Harry.

"Is he okay?" he asked.

"He's afraid," Harry answered. Professor Flitwick lifted Jim to his feet.

"Come with me, James," he said kindly. "We don't have much time." He escorted him out of the carriage. Harry looked at Hermione.

"What did that mean? 'Not much time'?" he asked. Hermione was pale.

"She wasn't well, Harry. She... she lost a lot of blood." Hermione's voice began to quake. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry. If she dies..." Hermione began to tremble and Ron put his arms around her holding her close.

"She's not going to die!" Harry snapped standing to his feet.

“A head injury like that is dangerous, mate.” Ron whispered looking pale himself. “We almost lost you this summer, and you were wearing a helmet.” He continued to hold Hermione in his arms.

As students gathered their gear to depart, rumors spread like wildfire throughout the train. One told how Draco, flanked by half a dozen Slytherins, had tried to kill Cho because she was Asian, and before Malfoy could finish her off Harry came to her rescue. Another version had Cho already dead. At the Slytherin end, word came from Crabbe and Goyle. Draco had simply complimented Cho and Harry flew into a fit of jealous rage. He pushed her nearly through the window, and attacked Draco without provocation.

Ron, Hermione and Harry remained in the compartment as the students filed off the train. Hagrid’s voice was heard calling for the first years to follow him. A number of students were walking toward the horseless carriages. Harry could see the Threstrals waiting to take them to Hogwarts. They seemed nervous. One stretched its wings when Harry noticed another surge in the crowd. Somebody yelled, and suddenly the darkened streets erupted in a blaze of colored light. Students began firing jinxes and stunning spells into a group of Slytherins, who returned the fire. He could see Anthony Goldstein leading the charge. His shots weren’t very effective, Harry thought, but what he lacked in precision he made up for in quantity. He was firing like a man possessed.

“They tried to kill her, I tell you!” he screamed, and plunged into a sea of green followed by a dozen more Ravenclaws.

“I’ve got to do something,” Harry said standing to leave, but Ron grabbed his arm.

“Do what, Harry?” he asked shaking his head. “It’s madness out there.” But Harry left Hermione and Ron in the compartment and entered into Hogsmeade.

Assisted by the lead engineer, Hagrid was still calling for the first years, and they were now running for him, trying to duck the wild spells. A few hit Hagrid on the back bouncing off with the thud of a winter snowball. But they did raise his temper. To their credit, he and

the engineer concentrated on the safety of the younger students. Harry ran over to help them get the first years in the boats and on their way. A beam of red light shot from the crowd toward them. Harry flicked his wand and deflected it.

“Go on Hagrid, get them to the school!” he called. “I’ll try to do something.” He looked back over his shoulder at the crowd with no clue as to what that something might be. As soon as Hagrid and the students were on their way, the engineer ran to help a fifth year who had been stunned at the front of the train. Harry turned back to the onslaught.

Screams rang out, up and down the streets. The regular townspeople of Hogsmeade were ducking into the various shops just for cover. Other parents had brought their children to meet the train and take the carriages to Hogwarts. Unaware of what had happened on the train, they were completely dumfounded. But when some students saw their own classmates being attacked, they too joined the fray.

Soon it was no longer just Ravenclaw against Slytherin. Others, out to settle scores from years gone by, began to try and get even. Before long, students were firing at others they didn’t even know just because they didn’t like the way they looked. Harry saw Ron and Hermione emerge from the train. They were yelling at the students to stop, but few would listen. Hermione was knocking the wands out of student’s hands right and left, but there were just too many. Ron seemed able to block the occasional spell that flew their way. “Brilliant,” Harry thought, “but not enough.”

Harry looked over at the Threstrals. They were becoming irritated by all the commotion. “Threstrals,” he whispered. Quickly he ran to the front of the waiting carriages. He raised his wand and cast a stunning spell into the ground before the lead carriage. The creature reared and turned toward the fighting. Harry cast another, and another. One by one each creature turned toward the melee. There was certainly the smell of blood in the air. The Threstrals were intrigued, and now even more agitated. Finally, Harry conjured a Patronus and charged it into the crowd, firing on the Threstrals at the same time.

The plan worked. The horseless carriages plunged into the crowd following the stag. The students, intent at firing on one another, realized that a hundred carriages were careening their way. Some were bowled over by the invisible creatures causing even more panic in the crowd. The firing stopped, and they scattered like mice. In a matter of minutes, professors from the school began to appear. Professor McGonagall had her wand raised and was yelling at the Gryffindors to gather to her. Professors Snape and Sprout did the same.

“Professor McGonagall!” Harry called. “Professor Flitwick, he’s gone to St. Mungo’s with Cho’s brother Jim!” But a flash and a snap later revealed Professor Flitwick apparating among the Ravenclaws.

“This way!” he squeaked, raising his wand. No one dared disobey.

There were many students unable to answer the call to gather to their Heads of House. Some lay on the ground unable to move; others unable to see which way to go. Anthony Goldstein ran to Professor Flitwick, “They tried to kill her!” he screamed. The words echoed down the streets of Hogsmeade. Covered in blood and inflicted with a jinx that had made one leg stiff as a board, he pleaded his case again. “They tried to kill her.” Harry could hear something more behind the words, something much deeper.

“Anthony!” yelled Professor Flitwick, “Stop this instant!” Undaunted, he turned and limped toward the group of Slytherins.

He kept repeating, “They tried to kill her. They tried to kill her.” He raised his wand.

“Petrificus Totalus!” rang out. It was Professor Flitwick. Immediately Anthony went stiff and fell to the ground. Two other Ravenclaw students ran to his side.

“That is enough!” cried Professor McGonagall. “Each house will walk back to Hogwarts. Take the time to think about how foolish you’ve all been!”

And so, what would later be called the Hogsmeade March began. The sky was dark, and it began to rain. Large ruts of mud splattered students as they splashed through the puddles. Each house kept a wide berth between the other. Slytherins were at the head of the line, Ravenclaws at the rear.

Malfoy was walking toward the end of the group of Slytherins with Crabbe and Goyle; at least it looked like Malfoy. His face was covered in gauze. Hermione and Ron had joined Harry at the head of the Gryffindors. Harry's eyes trained on Malfoy as the rain splattered his glasses.

"You were brilliant Harry," Hermione said, holding his arm, Ron at her side. "They'd still be fighting if it weren't for you."

"I don't know," replied Harry, "You and Ron were getting on pretty good." He smiled back at them. "It looked like the Slytherins were getting whipped pretty bad. Maybe we should have let them finish it." The smile left his face. He knew what it was Anthony felt, holding Cho in his arms. "I hope she's okay," he whispered. Hermione squeezed tighter.

The glow of lit wands made for an eerie procession. The trip, which during happier times, seemed to take ten minutes, now was taking ten times longer. Students tried, as best they could, to help their hurt classmates walk toward the school. Ron stepped to the aid of Katie Bell who had been hit with a curse from a Ravenclaw while they were arguing over Quidditch. Heavy drops of rain splashed whitecaps on the lake as they passed by. The air was silent, save for the splatter of rain on the wet ground. No one spoke as the rain seemed to drain their last bit of energy as they passed the Whomping Willow swaying in the evening breeze.

When they arrived at the front doors, the groups began to compress. There was a fuss and a bit of shoving when Professor Flitwick levitated above the crowd. His flaming wand lit the grounds below. "If I see so much as one false move," he squeaked, "you'll find yourself hanging from the seventh story by your ears!" Everyone looked up to the top of the castle, and the commotion instantly died down.

Madame Pomfrey and two other healers were waiting as they arrived. "If you're hurt come with me!" she yelled. About three-dozen students filed forward. Many more were injured, but unwilling to go. The sheer number of injuries stunned her. "Absolute foolishness!" she quipped. "In all my years... Harper," she cast a levitation spell on Anthony, "guide Goldstein to the hospital wing. You there! Crabbe, who is that?" Crabbe looked up.

"Draco ma'am," he said dully.

"Well, bring him here. So Mr. Malfoy, what's happened to you?" But there was no reply. "Very well. Crabbe, help him on his way." The healers swept the injured students into the castle. Professor McGonagall stood before the crowd.

"If you think this is finished...it is not!" she called. "Professor Dumbledore and the first years are waiting for you inside. File in quietly or you'll have him to deal with!" Slowly, everyone made their way into the Great Hall. The familiar house banners hung over the ends of each house table. With so many in the hospital wing, the hall seemed empty, echoing the sound of every movement. As students sat, one could hear the sound of water dripping to the stone floor from their soaked robes.

Professor McGonagall walked over to the first years who, though dry, seemed absolutely petrified. Hagrid nodded to her as he took his seat at the head table. Harry caught Dumbledore's eyes for the first time. They were grim. Were they blaming Harry? As the last students sat, Dumbledore rose to his feet.

"Today we mark only the second time in Hogwarts' history where house has turned on house in so violent a way. At a time when it is more vital than ever that we should join together, I fear Voldemort may have already won." There was a shudder in the crowd. "You must ask, each of you, if it is worth the price. You have saved Voldemort the effort by turning brother on brother, and sister on sister. How much easier it will be for him to take you, to take your families. Your house name will mean nothing if he should gain control of this school. And yet, you seem eager enough to be done with it." As he stood, Dumbledore's shoulders slumped.

"This year we have a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, an Auror, Professor Nymphadora Tonks." Subdued applause greeted her warmly. Harry's eyes darted to Tonks. He hadn't noticed earlier. He was expecting to see a pink-haired girl. Instead she wore black hair and looked every bit a woman. Her face was stern and cold. He'd never seen her look like that. Dumbledore continued, "Tell me... Is it pointless that you should learn Defense Against The Dark Arts? Shall I send Professor Tonks home this year?"

"No!" Harry called out. Professor Dumbledore glanced his way.

"Shall we invite Voldemort in for tea?" he pressed. This time Ron, Hermione and a few other students scattered throughout the hall joined in.

"No!"

"Shall we close the doors of Hogwarts and be done with it?" Now most of the students were standing.

"No!" they yelled.

"Please," Dumbledore said, holding his hands high, "take your seats." He paused, and then leaned toward the students below. "I shall ask this question only once," Dumbledore's voice lowered. The only other sound was the rhythmic drip of water on the castle floor. "To raise your wand in anger, to turn on your own, to hate those who would be your allies... IS IT WORTH THE PRICE?" he commanded an answer. But, now the entire school stood. Even Crabbe and Goyle were caught up in the energy.

"NO!" they all cheered. Harry wondered if Malfoy would have risen to his feet.

Dumbledore straightened, and a smile appeared upon his face. He held his hands out and everyone sat. "This year," he said, "we will face many challenges. We will be stronger, only if we can face them together." He turned toward the large group of first years huddling behind Professor McGonagall. "This year, the new class is one of the

largest ever. I fear that their future mentors have left them with a rather poor first impression. I hope they will learn, as I already know, the great warmth and love you have for each other." He sat down with a slight smile on his face.

Professor McGonagall placed a stool at the front of the hall. The Sorting Hat sat motionless as if scanning the students before him. Then the tear in the rim opened and he began his song. It was a melancholy tune.

Long, long ago four strangers met

on a voyage from the sea.

Of face and mind, of heart and soul,

they were different as can be.

Discovered they, a common thread

that would bind them to each other.

They'd share their gifts with sorcerers;

guide as sister and as brother.

"A wondrous thought," said Ravenclaw.

"We will build a school to teach."

"But where on earth," asked Hufflepuff,

"is from Muggles, out of reach?"

Twas Gryffindor who felled the land

from the mountain to the falls.

And Slytherin who found the gold

used to build these very walls.

Said he, "Pureblood lines set the mark
of the greatest whom shall enter."

But Gryffindor was Muggle born;

Thus was sewn the seed of winter.

Four strangers, all became best friends;
merged talent in unity.

Yet split the one school into four
so that one might best the three.

In one was placed the diligent.

One took the brightest minds.

Another took the brave at heart.

The last sought pureblood lines.

Each one searched for the perfect path
so to make their students best.

Yet, the greatest trait had sunk too low
like a red sun in the west.

Lost inside was love and friendship,
which bound them on ship at sea.

Together they held then power--

bringing life, and energy.

Too soon, the seed had grown it seemed
of enmity and despair.

When stunning spells and curses too
began flying through the air.

Each, alone, without the other
fought to stop the inner war.

But each, alone, had lost the trait,
which would bring us peace once more.

The greatest fight the age has seen
saw the closest of them all,
turn wand on wand before the school.

Tw'as then we began the fall.

Slytherin fought his finest friend
to prove that he was right.

Though, both his heart and hapless soul
were screaming for the light.

Gryffindor dropped his wand and turned,
but the serpent struck his back.

And thus was drawn the golden sword

so to fend off the attack.

He raised the blade high in the air

and there its head did hew.

And ignorance and enmity

laid bare for all to view.

The friendship of the sword and snake

was severed that dark day,

until it is renewed again

to save us from the fray.

The battle rages on you see,

and reaps a bitter cost.

In you the challenge lies within

to find the trait once lost.

If soon you don't find unity

within this grand estate,

the enemy will win unchecked,

and doom you to his fate.

There, now you know all that's been said.

For I've warned you once before.

Perhaps too late I truly feared

as I saw you breech the door.

New Students! Come and gird yourselves

for the challenge deep within.

I'll send you to the proper house.

Let the sorting now begin!

For the first time, in Harry's memory, the Great Hall was silent after the Sorting Hat's song. Scanning the tables, many were looking down at their plates or sheepishly at the house tables that stood to either side. Some looked to those they'd considered friends just three months before, but who they'd blasted just hours earlier. The Hall was filled with a tremendous sense of shame and regret. Even Harry's mind turned to the hospital wing and Draco Malfoy. With his thumb he rubbed his forearm.

Dumbledore held out his hand toward the first years still standing to the side of the great hall. Their wide eyes were unblinking. "These students represent some of the brightest, and bravest, most cunning and diligent students ever to cross the gates of Hogwarts. They will be sorted as has been the custom, but I hope that each of your houses will welcome them as part of the Hogwarts family."

Professor McGonagall walked over to the Sorting Hat, her steps reverberating against the walls. In front of the school she held a very long parchment in front of her. Her glasses hung low on her nose as she read the list and called the first name.

The Sorting Hat placed Spencer Allistar in Hufflepuff, Ron Atwood in Hufflepuff, Peter Black in Ravenclaw, and Rebecca Brandt in Gryffindor. Each one received cheers from their house, and general applause from the rest of the school. Professor McGonagall continued down the list without thinking.

"Chang, James!" she called. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room as the name echoed off the stone walls of the Great Hall.

Immediately she realized her mistake, and the blood drained from her face. "Yes, well..." There were murmurs in the hall. "let's see then..."

"Ravenclaw!" yelled Padma Patil from the Ravenclaw table. The Ravenclaws burst into cheers. And just as the clapping began to subside, Harry stood.

"Gryffindor!" he yelled, and the Gryffindor table howled and cheered.

"Hufflepuff!" called Ernie Macmillan and they too cheered. There was the slightest pause when Pansy Parkinson stood up.

"Slytherin!" she called. And the whole school erupted in an explosion of cheers.

Somewhere, in St. Mungo's, James Chang sat by the hospital bed of his sister, not knowing that he had just been the first Hogwarts student accepted into all four houses. A small seed of spring planted on the 1st of September that would grow into the ultimate defeat of the Dark Lord.

Chapter 17 -- The Metamorphmagus

By the time Harry and the others entered the Gryffindor common room they were exhausted. With the large number of new students, the sorting lasted forever. Ron thought they would never eat, and yet when meal time did come, he mostly just sat with his eyes closed. He was clearly not enjoying himself in the Great Hall. Harry thought it might be the voices again. It was all Ron could do, as Prefect, to direct the first years into the Gryffindor common room. Ron immediately fell into one of the large soft armchairs by the fire. Hermione was concerned.

"Ron," she said, "you don't look well at all. You didn't eat much of anything, and that's not like you." She held his hand. "You're cold. Do you want to go to the hospital wing?"

"It'll be a madhouse in there," he whispered. "I'll be fine; it's just a headache." He turned to Dean Thomas. "Hey, Dean, would you get the first years straightened away?"

"Sure thing, Ron." Dean smiled back. "Take it easy." Dean stood and cupped his hands over his mouth. "Okay first year boys!" he yelled. "Quit gawking. You'll have plenty of time to look around in a year or two. Now it's time you get to bed. Follow me!" And the first year Gryffindors stepped behind Dean like new recruits at boot camp.

Hermione sighed. "Well, Ron, I'll see you tomorrow. And Harry, perhaps we can have a little talk tomorrow too, okay?" Harry nodded as she called to the first year girls. They disappeared up the stairs to the girls' dormitories.

After they had left, the common room grew very quiet. Everyone was looking at their new special guest. The result of one of the changes Dumbledore was instituting this year: an exchange program between the houses.

From each house, was selected an individual to spend the term with a different house. They would represent both the house they were visiting and the house they were from in losing or winning house points. If they participated in competitions, like chess or Quidditch,

they would represent the house they were visiting. Seamus Finnigan of Gryffindor had been sent to Ravenclaw. Taylor Watson of Ravenclaw was sent to Hufflepuff. Hannah Abbott of Hufflepuff was sent to Slytherin, remaining a Prefect. Gregory Goyle of Slytherin, fresh from the hospital wing after a rather sound round of jinxes by Ravenclaw, was now in the Gryffindor Common Room. All eyes were trained on him, as he stood motionless, and a bit pale, looking into the fire.

Finally, Harry spoke out breaking the uncomfortable silence, "Ron, do you know where he's staying." Ron nodded, but wouldn't look at Harry. "Finnegan's bed?" Harry sighed. Ron nodded again. Unhappy, but not willing to be the reason for problems, he turned to Goyle.

"Okay, Goyle, follow me. You'll be sleeping in my room." He started up the stairs to the boys' dormitories. Goyle stayed planted on the spot. "Look," Harry said, "Your trunk will be up these stairs on your right. I don't care where you sleep. I'm exhausted." Goyle was clearly distraught. He scanned the room.

"You're not going to make me sleep in the same room with Potter are you?" He was looking for anyone who would come to his aid. "He'll... he'll kill me!"

"Look Goyle, nobody's going to kill you," Ron said trying to calm him.

"Did you see what he did to Draco? Did you see his face?" The blood was beginning to pool in Goyle's large feet. Clearly without his mentor, he was at a loss. "They can't fix it. Madame Pomfrey, and all the others tried. He'll kill me, I tell you!"

"Alright, Goyle," Ron stood up still shaky and casting a glance at Harry who was at the top of the stairs waiting. "I'll keep an eye on him for you." And Ron pulled his wand out pointing it at Harry. "No funny business, eh mate?" he tried to say in as serious a voice as he could muster.

"Whatever," Harry shrugged rubbing his eyes.

Within seconds of hitting the pillow Harry was asleep. Whatever happened to Goyle he didn't know and he didn't care. When he woke the next morning, Goyle's bed was empty. In fact, it barely looked slept in. Neville and Dean had left, and Ron was just getting up. Harry stretched as the first sunrise in October splashed across the Hogwarts grounds.

"How are you doing Ron?" Harry asked.

"Better, mate, much better." He rubbed his face with his hands. "It was bloody awful last night. They weren't voices," he whispered, "they were screams. Everybody smashed together. It didn't start to settle down till everybody cheered for Jim Chang." He yawned. "I'm going to the shower."

"Where's Goyle?" Harry asked.

"He was sitting on the edge of his bed staring at you when I fell asleep. He was totally terrified." Ron shook his head half smiling. "I don't know where he is this morning. I wonder how Seamus is doing?"

"Well, let's get ready and ask him."

As the two departed through the portrait of the Fat Lady groomed and ready for the day, Hermione called from behind.

"Ron! Wait up," she called. She ran down the steps carrying two books with her. The three continued down to the Great Hall. "Harry," she asked, "have you read the fifth chapter in Advanced Transfiguration?"

"Hermione, why do you ask questions you already know the answers to?" Harry asked.

"Because she wants to tell you that she has," said Ron with a smile. Hermione looked cross for an instant, then smiled back.

As they sat eating their breakfast, they scanned the tables looking for the Gryfindors that had transferred to the other houses. Seamus was

just finishing at the Ravenclaw table. He looked a bit distraught as he walked by Harry, Ron and Hermione.

"I'm goin' to die," he moaned.

"What?" Harry cried standing to his feet. "What did they do?"

"I feel like such an idiot, and it's only breakfast." He plopped himself down next to Ron. "Do yeh know what they were doin' this morning in their common room?" Seamus asked, and Ron shrugged. "Quizzin' each other on facts from their books! Advanced, eh... somethin' er other." He stood. "I don' think they're used teh Ravenclaws losin' points fer bein' daft." His shoulder slumped.

"You're not daft, Seamus!" Hermione snapped. "And don't let them say you are. You may be sleeping in Ravenclaw, but you're still a Gryffindor! Don't forget what that means." Seamus straightened adjusting his robes.

"Right, Hermione." He took a deep breath, and off he went, a bit taller than when he sat down. Harry watched as Seamus left the hall. Then his eyes went to the head table. Tonks had arrived and was speaking with Hagrid. The night had softened her look, and a smile was on both their faces. Harry sighed, and looked down at his hands.

A voice started to whisper in his mind. "What's wrong, Harry?" A picture of red eyes flashed in his mind, and then Harry hit Ron on the leg with his fist.

"Ouch!" he yelped.

"Harry," snapped Hermione, "why did you..."

"It's alright Hermione," Ron interrupted rubbing his leg with one hand, and his temple with the other.

"Boys!" Hermione breathed exasperated. "Well, we better be off. First class is in the dungeons, and we'll be late if...." Ron began to push eggs around on his plate. "Oh, sorry Ron," she whispered. He too took a deep breath and exhaled.

"It's okay Hermione. You and Harry have a good time in Potions. I've got Professor Santos for Muggle Studies." A smile began to appear on Ron's face. "Give Snape a kiss for me, Harry."

"Professor Snape!" Harry uttered back, in his best Dumbledore voice. The three laughed. Hermione touched Ron by the side of the face.

"I'll see you at lunch, okay Ron?" she said with a warm smile. He looked at her and then at Harry. Hermione dropped her hand. "Potions, Harry?" The two left Ron still sliding his eggs from one side of his plate to the other.

The Potions N.E.W.T. included students from all four houses. From Gryffindor Dean had made it, but Neville had not. There were only two from Hufflepuff, about seven from Ravenclaw including Marietta, and eight from Slytherin. For the first time, Malfoy found himself in Potions without Crabbe or Goyle.

His face was covered in bandages as he sat at the back of the room as far away from Harry as he could manage. Only his right eye could be seen, with a small slit for a mouth and nose. The eye refused to look at his nemesis. For the first time, Harry wasn't the one everyone was taking quick glances at. Indeed the class seemed intrigued with Malfoy's new look. Quite enjoying the moment, Harry decided to go over and speak with Marietta.

"Is she okay?" he asked his voice tightening. Marietta slightly shrugged and then nodded.

"I think so Harry." She held his hand. "They made me leave right away." Her lip began to quiver. "She was coming around when we brought her in though. The nurse outside said that was a good sign. Just as I left, she asked if you were okay." The steel door to the dungeon burst open and slammed shut as Professor Snape strode in, robes furred in his wake.

"I understand that you expect some special privilege, Potter. But remember that in this class you will receive none." In the back Draco sniggered. "And, if you intend to stay in this N.E.W.T., I expect you to

be ready for class before I walk through the door. Can you wrap your rather large head around that?" Harry was already walking toward his seat when he looked back at Snape. The first thought in his mind was that the only person with a large head in this class was Malfoy, sitting in the corner covered in bandages.

"Yes, sir," he said with a pleasant voice. "Sorry, Professor." And Harry sat back down next to Hermione. He was determined not to let Snape goad him and he was successful. Indeed, the more insults that Snape cast Harry's way the more pitiful the man before him seemed. For once, Harry was not so irritated at Snape the man, that he couldn't hear Snape the Professor. And, except for stirring a bit too vigorously, his portion was nearly perfect. When the lesson was over, each student poured a sample and handed it to their partner. Harry gave his to Hermione, and she to him. In the back, Malfoy found himself alone. The Jailbreak potion, as it was called, was originally concocted to shrink you just long enough to squeeze through jail cell bars, after which you would regain your normal size and run away.

Padma sat next to Marietta whose mind had clearly been on the events of the day before. When Padma took the potion, only her head shrunk. It reminded Harry of one of the Death Eaters he had battled at the Ministry of Magic--the one whose head was that of a baby. Most everyone laughed including Marietta, and after a few moments her head re-grew to normal size. Professor Snape stood over the two of them.

"As humorous as you may find your failure, Ms. Edgecombe," he hissed, "realize that three such failures in this class and you will be removed. You now have one." His words were ice. "Do I make myself clear?" Marietta glared at him.

"Who you need to remove, sir, is that beast in back!" she snapped. She turned glowering at Malfoy.

"Mr. Malfoy? Well, let's see." He walked to the back of the room. "I see you have no partner, Mr. Malfoy. Very well, take your own potion." Through his bandages, Malfoy sipped the liquid. Immediately his entire body began to shrink in unison.

"As you can see Ms. Edgecombe, Mr. Malfoy's potion is once again..." There was a scream in the back of the room, and then the crash of a cauldron. Two Slytherins were backing away from Malfoy. Harry watched the whole thing. Malfoy's potion worked to perfection, but when his body and head shrunk, the bandages around his face fell to the floor. The blistering Harry remembered on the train had all but disappeared. But as his head re-grew the disfigurement became apparent to everybody. A dagger, wrapped with a snake, hung like a teardrop from the corner of his left eye. The blade plunging down his cheek and ending near his chin. Fruitlessly he tried to wrap the bandages about his face. Everyone, including Snape, stared in horror.

"Class is dismissed," he spluttered. Everyone stood in place gawking. "You heard me, leave!" he shouted. As Harry started for the door, Snape cast him a glance from the corner of his eye.

"Yes, professor, it was me," he thought leaving Snape alone with Malfoy who was holding his hand to his face trying to turn away.

As Harry and Hermione made their way up to the front doors of the castle, she began the questions in the most subtle of ways.

"So, did you see Malfoy's face?" she asked looking down at her class schedule as if she hadn't already memorized it.

"Not too well," Harry replied. "He was on the other side of the room and all."

"It's the same mark he had last night on the train, I'd say."

"Interesting," he said refusing to give an inch. "Well, it should give him a whole new appreciation for the word scarhead, don't you think?"

"Interesting choice Harry... that it should be a snake."

"It's NOT a snake!" Harry snapped. A few students turned to look, then went on about their business. Hermione continued to study her schedule. He lowered his voice and said, "It's more, much more."

"Is it?" she asked innocently. And in the sweetness of the question, Harry knew he'd been hooked like a fat fish in the lake. He pulled her aside, out of the flow of students making their way in and out of the front doors.

"You... you're a sly one you are," he said. "Yes, it's more. We can talk about it tonight. I've got class with Hagrid now, so it'll have to wait." She stared at his face, smiling, glancing from eye to eye.

"A sword and a snake appear on Malfoy's face hours before the Sorting Hat sings about them for the first time." Her smile turned to concern. "... I can't seem to tell this year Harry," she whispered. "Are you, okay?" He nodded, but had to look away.

"Yes," he whispered in reply, and then louder, "but I won't be if I'm late for class, and neither will you if you miss Arithmancy." He left her looking at his back as he pushed open the front doors, and made his way toward Hagrid's Hut.

Students had already gathered around the half-giant near the paddock. Harry was surprised to see more than himself and Ron. Indeed there were a number of students including an odd pair, Padma's sister Parvati and her friend Lavender. More stunning was the presence of Crabbe and Goyle. Even though Goyle was now in Gryffindor, it was clear he was keeping the old alliance.

"It's the only N.E.W.T. they passed," Ron whispered in Harry's ear. "I've got 'em in Muggle studies, too," he sighed dejectedly.

In front of Hagrid was a low table, and on the table were three small boxes. "Please don't let them be dangerous," Harry thought to himself.

"Gather roun', gather roun'," Hagrid called to them all. Nobody moved. "Come on, they won' bite," he coaxed happily. Slowly Harry and Ron stepped forward. "Wha' we 'ave 'ere is one of the rares' magical creatures there is." He opened one of the boxes, and gently lifted a tiny black furry creature into his massive hand. Around it's neck was a small silver collar.

"A molamar," Harry gasped. Hagrid had to do a double-take when he heard Harry utter the words.

"Why righ' yeh are, Harry. Five points fer Gryffindor." Parvati and Lavender were now coming forward ooh-ing and ah-ing. Lavender reached to pet the creature's shiny fur, but Hagrid pulled it away. "Not too fas' there Ms. Brown," he cautioned. "They may look pretty an' cuddly, an' there's the problem. The molamar is famous fer two things: Firs', when it's dormant, like yeh see here, they don' eat ner drink nothin'. A little warmth an' they'll survive fer years. Second, they're one of the greatest minin' creatures on earth. They're responsible for the London undergroun', the great diamon' mines in South Africa, an' the early coal mines in the States." His face turned grim. "Problem is, they're also responsible for the great Sahara desert."

"Hagrid?" Ron asked, "How can this little thing be responsible for anything more than diggin' up my mum's roses?" Everyone laughed. The idea that the little creature dwarfed in Hagrid's hand could do much of anything seemed absurd.

"When the molamar leaves the dormant state, it begins ter grow Ron. As quickly as it can eat dirt, it grows bigger. A full-grown molamar is about the size of a large whale, an' no bit o magic 'ill shrink 'em down. Once they're full grown, they can't stop eatin'. It's as if they're makin' up fer all the years they fasted. They tear through rock an' stone an' grind it teh dust tryin' teh find any organic material they can. If a niffler looks fer treasure, the molamar looks fer carbon--coal, diamonds, and oil. An' when that's gone, plants, animals... and people. Unchecked, these three, full-grown, would turn the Forbidden Forest inteh a dust bowl in abou' a month."

"Should they even be here, then?" asked Crabbe. "Aren't they dangerous?" Hagrid shook his head.

"Well, a lot of 'em have been killed through the years. There are maybe a hundred left on earth. Misunderstood is wha' they are." Harry and Ron looked at each other raising their eyebrows. "See here," Hagrid said rubbing the tip of one finger on the molamar's

silver collar. "The collar can't be removed, an' as long it's around the critter's neck, it can't grow."

Hagrid continued on with a lesson, Harry thought, even Hermione would enjoy. With the cautionary note to stay away from the creature's collar, each of them was allowed to hold the soft furry creatures. It was amazing how well things went without Malfoy there to ruin everything. Before long it was time for lunch. As the rest of the class headed back to the castle, Ron and Harry stayed behind and helped Hagrid put the molamars back in their boxes.

"I see you're looking well," Harry noted to Hagrid. "Is Grawpy gone then?"

"Nah, he's still in there. Got 'imself a nice place now really. Tha's where these buggers came in. Used one teh make him a nice cave near Aragog.

"Aragog?" Ron screeched.

"Yeah, well, I know yeh had a bad run in with him and all. But I've talked to him about tha' and he said he's sorry, didn' know yeh and all. Besides he and Grawpy, they've become kinda friends yeh see."

"Friends?" Ron squeaked.

"Well, he was lonely. I didn' have a chance teh get him a partner yet. I was gonna go back this summer, but didn' have the time. Good thing is the Centaurs are leavin' him alone now. They won' go near Aragog and his family."

"No," Harry said, "I bet they won't." He handed Hagrid the last small box containing a molamar. "Well Hagrid, a brilliant lesson, really, but where's the big one?"

"Ah, tha' one. Well, I had him shipped off teh China. Big dam they're buildin'." Harry shook his head and just smiled.

"Come on Ron, we better be getting on." Hagrid held Harry by the shoulder.

“Harry, wha’ you did las’ night, helpin’ the kids. That was somethin’... somethin’ special that was. It makes me proud teh see what kind of man yer becomin’.

The words were still echoing in Harry’s ears when he sat down for lunch with Ron and Hermione in the Great Hall. Again he found his thumb rubbing the smooth flesh of his right forearm. “What kind of man am I becoming?” he whispered.

“Well, Malfoy came in late to my Arithmancy class,” Hermione said. “The bandages were back.” A few seats down Goyle was eating and actually carrying on a conversation with Dean Thomas about Muggle soccer. The three of them slid that way.

“Hey, Goyle,” Ron called under his breath. “What’s up with the bandages?” Goyle simply took another mouthful saying nothing. Ron turned to Harry. “I heard Malfoy’s face was melted, and that his brains have started to ooze out of his left ear.”

“They have not!” Goyle snapped. Hermione picked up where Ron left off.

“Someone from potions told me that he has the mark of a Death Eater on his face!”

“It’s not the mark of the Dark L...” he stopped himself.

“What? What is it then?” she pressed. Goyle looked to Harry.

“Ask him! He put it there.” For a moment Goyle paused. “They still can’t get it off Potter. Snape’s going to McGonagall, and she’ll make you remove it.” Harry looked at Goyle. His green eyes were hard and his face set like stone.

“I can’t,” he said. “There’s only one person in this castle who can.” Instinctively, everyone glanced to the head table. Dumbledore sat lunching with Tonks. They were both smiling about something. Harry shook his head. “If we’re lucky, the day will come when you’ll

understand.” He took another drink and left his seat. Ron stood as well.

“Hey Ron,” Dean called. “Where’s Ginny.” It was as if someone had just thrown gasoline on a lit birthday cake. Ron’s eyes instantly flamed.

“Do I look like her keeper?” he snapped.

“Hey, no big deal, I just thought...”

“You just thought what? That you could have your way with my sister?” Harry grabbed Ron by the arm.

“Come on Ron let’s go.” He began to pull him out of the Great Hall.

“Well you can’t!” Ron called back. “I’ll make sure of that!” They made it to the corridor.

“What’s up with you, Ron?” Harry asked. “You feeling okay?”

“I’m fine,” Ron snapped again. But to Harry, he looked tired. They walked silently toward the common room. Finally, Ron broke the silence. “She loves him, can you believe it?”

“Well I had an idea that she might...”

“No. I’ve seen it in her... well, you know. She is starry-eyed in love.”

“I don’t know, Ron,” Harry spoke as they started up the moving staircases. “For what it’s worth, I think Dean loves Ginny too.” They stepped off on their floor, took a few steps, and then Ron nodded.

“He does,” he spoke emphatically.

“Well, then,” said Harry wondering if he should tell Ginny, “that really is excellent, isn’t it?” Ron stopped, grabbed Harry by the robes, and darted his eyes up and down the corridor to the Fat Lady.

"No! It's not excellent. It's bloody terrible is what it is! What if, what if..."

"What if what, Ron?"

"He's... well, he's black, Harry," Ron whispered as if saying the Dark Lord's name himself. Harry was confused. Of course he was black. "They love each other, Harry. It's not just some kind of fling. This might actually last. What if they want to get married?" Harry was starting to take up where Ron was going, and he didn't like it.

"And if they did?" he asked slowly.

"Well, they might... have children," Ron explained as if it seemed so obvious.

"Yes?"

"They'd be... they'd be half-breeds, Harry," he breathed.

"Half-breeds?" Did his best friend just say what he thought he said? He could feel the temper rising from the pit of his stomach, but he felt cold. "I see. Half-breeds. I guess that would make you the uncle of a half-breed, wouldn't it?" He could see by Ron's eyes that Ron wanted to take the words back. But he couldn't could he? They were out on the table now. Now Harry knew why he'd been so angry about Ginny and Dean. It wasn't just that he was dating his sister, it was because he was serious about her, and she about him. And the problem with that--he was black. "What's that make me then, Ron? Or Seamus? It doesn't bother you that Dean's a mudblood?"

"That... that's different," he sputtered.

"Why, because I'm white and he's black?" Harry grabbed Ron's robes this time and spun him to the wall hidden behind a suit of armor. "What if I wasn't, Ron? What if I was a half-breed?" And as he held Ron tight against the wall, his eyes began to turn brown, and his skin began to darken. "Could I still be your friend if I looked like this, Ron?" Ron stared horror struck. "COULD I?" he yelled.

“You... you’re a... how?” The green returned to Harry’s eyes, as he released Ron from his grasp as if disgusted from the touch.

“None of your damn business!” he spat. “We’re through, do you hear me?” Harry straightened his robes. “I wouldn’t want to dirty your pure-blood doormat, Ron. It’s far too white for my filthy shoes.” And he turned and walked away leaving Ron gawking against the wall.

Chapter 18 - True Colours

It was raining hard outside the castle as Harry made his way to Transfiguration. Students were running in from the front lawn trying to escape the sudden downpour. Harry strode through the corridor in a trance. "How could I have been so stupid?" he asked himself out loud. "A bloody racist is what he is. Why didn't I know?" A cluster of students burst through the front doors, soaked and laughing at each other--Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. Harry took no notice. He was searching his mind for a clue, some hint from the past of Ron's predilection. Nothing came.

Suddenly, he found himself entering class; he was late. Professor McGonagall was at the front already discussing what was written on the board.

"Mr. Potter," she said, "So nice of you to join us this afternoon. Please take a seat. Five points from Gryffindor." Hermione, seated in the front, moaned. Harry scanned the room. The seat next to Hermione was already taken. He plopped down in the first chair he came to, and immediately recognized his mistake. On his left sat Draco Malfoy. Professor McGonagall noted it, but made no effort to switch the pair. Harry briefly looked at the blonde whose attention was focused forward. A few students were casting glances backwards, but not at Harry. They were looking at the Slytherin, but Harry refused to look at him again, and neither spoke to the other.

"As I was saying for those of you who arrived on time," Professor McGonagall continued, "the spell is a very difficult one. Those unable to accomplish it by the end of the first term will be dropped from this N.E.W.T."

"What spell?" Harry whispered as if Hermione were at his side. But the only sound returned was a small snort.

Professor McGonagall demonstrated the transfiguration of a pillow into a goose, and then untransfigured it back. "Today, however, we'll start with something quite similar," she said. She then explained how they would change a box turtle to a sphere and back again. Each pair of students had one stone box turtle to work with.

Harry reached for the box turtle. Malfoy grabbed it instead.

“I think not, Potter. Let someone who knows what they’re doing have the first crack.” He held his wand out. “You know, I ought to use this on you.” He leered at Harry with his one exposed eye.

“Yes, Draco,” Harry held the gaze. “You should.”

“Stop it, Potter.”

“Stop what, Draco.”

“I don’t know what you’re playing at, but I won’t have you...”

“Gentlemen!” called Professor McGonagall. “Perhaps a bit more concentration on the task at hand. Let’s see you give it a try Mr. Malfoy.” Malfoy turned his wand back on the box turtle.

“Orbista!” called Malfoy. The box turtle morphed into a solid ball and began rolling on the table.

“Exceptional, Mr. Malfoy! Now Mr. Potter, untransfigure.”

“Quadrena!” called Harry. The sphere flattened its sides and became, again, a box turtle.

“Astounding!” congratulated Professor McGonagall. “I don’t believe I’ve seen either of you two perform a transfiguration on the first attempt. Five points for Slytherin and Gryffindor.”

Professor McGonagall continued to work around the room while Malfoy and Harry continued to transfigure and untransfigure the creature in front of them.

“What’s this rubbish you told Goyle, Potter,” Malfoy asked, “you can’t remove the hex?”

"It's not a hex, and, no, I don't know how, Draco," Harry replied creating the sphere again. "And even if I did, I don't know that I'd want to."

"Oh, you'll want to, Potter. I can promise you that," Malfoy hissed.

"Tell me," Harry said feeling his pulse quicken, "if she dies, will you enjoy joining your father?" Malfoy was caught between hatred and fear.

"You... it, it was an accident, that's all. Orbista!"

"Accidents happen, I guess," said Harry, and the sphere slipped from his fingers and rolled off the table toward the back of the room. Professor McGonagall was discussing something with Hermione at the front of the class. When Malfoy went back to retrieve the sphere, Harry stood up. Malfoy turned, and when his eyes met Harry's, the sphere fell from his hands rolling across the floor. Harry reached down, and picked it up. In its reflection Harry saw two red eyes staring back at him. He handed the orb back to Malfoy, leaning close. In the reflection of Malfoy's one un-bandaged eye, Harry again caught a glint of red. "I don't care much for mistakes, Draco. Don't let them happen again," he hissed, shoving the sphere in Malfoy's chest. Malfoy, his mouth agog, took one step backward as Professor McGonagall dismissed the class. Harry held his hands to his face, and then turned to pick up his things.

"Draco. Harry. A word please," she summoned the two to the front. Malfoy kept his distance. "I was very impressed with you two this afternoon. I expected to see sparks fly, and you were both perfectly behaved. Further, your work was exceptional. I want to see you two sit together for the rest of the term."

"Professor McGonagall!" they called simultaneously. She held up her hands.

"Now, let's see how things progress. Ms. Parkinson was never much help to you Draco you know that. Nor was Mr. Weasley of great aid to you Harry. Perhaps the two of you, together, can discover yet unseen

talents. At least, we can hope.” She began to walk to her desk, and then suddenly stopped.

“There is the one issue, Mr. Potter,” she said clearly uncomfortable. “Mr. Malfoy here believes you placed a hex on his face. Much in the same way Marietta was marked last year.”

“A hex?” Harry feigned bewilderment. “No I never hexed Draco.” Professor McGonagall raised an eyebrow. “In fact, when Draco came in and tried to kill Cho, I didn’t even have my wand on me. It was stuck in the cushions of the carriage we were riding, wasn’t it Draco?” Harry turned as if asking an old pal to back him up.

“Kill Cho?” Professor McGonagall asked. “I don’t understand. Mr. Malfoy, is this correct?” Malfoy was silent. “Well then, was Harry without a wand when you were attacked?” Malfoy’s continued delay convinced her it was so. “Then perhaps someone else...”

“It was Potter, I tell you!” he cried out. “He’s lying. I didn’t try to kill... Okay, so... so maybe it wasn’t his wand, he used his hands or... or... You’ve got to make him take it off Professor!” And he ripped the bandages from his face. The scar was dark-red against his pale skin. “I can’t walk around like this, I can’t!” The look took even Professor McGonagall by surprise. Seeing her reaction, Malfoy slumped to the floor burying his hands in his face. “I can’t.” Harry had never seen Malfoy like this before. He was always so arrogant, so sure of himself.

“Certainly,” Professor McGonagall continued, “you don’t think Mr. Potter could do that with the mere touch of his finger do you? No wizard could.” Malfoy looked up, rage filling his eyes.

“If you won’t make him,” he said rising from the floor, “I will!” He stepped toward Harry and raised his wand. In the same instant that Professor McGonagall called for Malfoy to stop, a familiar pain, but now more intense, shot down Harry’s right arm. He fell to one knee, grabbing his arm as a burst of red light flew over his head. An instant later Malfoy was on the floor writhing in pain, his hands pressed to his face.

"It's burning me!" he yelled, "Make it stop!" Professor McGonagall, her wand already drawn, turned from defender to healer.

"Harry, are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Harry nodded.

"Very well, go on your way. I'll deal with Mr. Malfoy." She pulled Malfoy's hands from his face and her wand emitted a blue glow. Malfoy stopped writhing, but he was still in pain. Harry started to leave. Looking back he could see the grim face on Professor McGonagall as she tried to bring Malfoy relief. Harry wasn't sure what he was feeling.

"Professor McGonagall," he called, "don't punish him for that. He's just confused, that's all. Give him time... he'll learn." Harry left, running for his next class.

Again he would be late. Basic Apparation was going to be taught by Professor Flitwick this year in the Charms classroom. When Harry arrived, the room, again, was filled. This time Hermione had saved him a seat next to her and Ron. She waved, but Harry slid into a seat next to Anthony Goldstein.

"You're out of the hospital," Harry whispered.

"Just after lunch," Anthony whispered back. At the front of the class Professor Flitwick was discussing the fundamental theory and basis for apparation.

"Have you heard anything about Cho?" Harry asked.

"A healer arrived from St. Mungo's this morning. All he would say is that she's still not well... that they'd know in a day or two." Anthony feigned taking notes, and instead was doodling on his parchment. It was a sketch of a girl on a broomstick chasing a snitch. Seeing Anthony's other parchments, Harry noted there were many more such doodles, some from last year.

“Teaching a course like this,” Professor Flitwick continued, “is very difficult since one can neither apparate, nor disapparate on the Hogwarts grounds.” There was a general murmur in the class, as if this was the first anyone had ever heard such a thing. Hermione sighed with exasperation.

“Harry,” Anthony whispered again. “I’m with you on this one all the way. We’ll take out the lot you and me. Dumbledore stopped in the hospital wing the first night. Started going on about how we all needed to get along... find a way to unite... tottering old fool,” he hissed. “The only way You-Know-Who’s taking over Hogwarts is if the Slytherin vermin let him in through the front door. If Dumbledore can’t see that, Harry, we’ll have to make him, you and me.” Anthony grabbed Harry’s arm, the pain still there. Harry winced. “For Cho.”

Harry hadn’t said a word, and somehow found himself in some sort of pact with a Ravenclaw Prefect to wipe out all of Slytherin. Anthony kept whispering plans, but Harry wasn’t listening. His eyes were at the front of the class. At the redhead, with the freckles that ran down his back, now blended with scars that would put Malfoy’s to shame. Scars put there in large part because of Malfoy’s father. Ron was the one friend Harry had that didn’t think he was a freak from day one. He was the one friend that had always stood by him.

Harry thought back to Ron’s willingness to sacrifice himself at Wizard’s Chess, and how he stayed by Harry’s side to face Aragog. It seemed so long ago. And yet, after all these years, why hadn’t Harry seen it? Ron tried to duel with Malfoy after he called Hermione mudblood. What was it about the color of one’s skin? Why, of all things, would that bother Ron?

The redhead in the front row was rubbing the back of his neck. Hermione poked him trying to get him to pay attention. Well, it didn’t matter to Harry. He’d seen enough hatred to last a lifetime, and he wasn’t about to be chums with a poster child for discrimination. He squeezed his right hand, and flexed his shoulder. The ache had gone away and with it, Harry knew, the mark on his arm.

When the class was over Harry didn’t wait to head back to his room. Anthony tried to whisper a few things in the hallway, but Harry told

him they'd have to talk in private, and that appeared to satisfy him. As he passed through the portrait of the Fat Lady, he could feel his temper rising. How could this work, how could any of it work? "Hogwarts unity?" he spat to himself, heading up the stairs. "What a joke."

When he arrived, Goyle was sitting on the edge of Seamus' bed. He saw Harry and reached for his wand. "Sit down you idiot," Harry snapped raising his hand up and pushing Goyle back down on the bed, only his hand never actually touched Goyle. Flat on his back, Goyle looked over at Harry who was rummaging through his trunk.

"What... what are you doing?" Goyle asked nervously.

"Changing for dinner," Harry said frustrated. "Honestly Goyle, if you're going to have a heart attack every time I come into the room, maybe you should ask to go back to Slytherin." Goyle sat back up.

"I already have," he sighed dejectedly. "Dumbledore said no." Harry grabbed a sweatshirt and pulled it over his head. Outside it was raining again.

"Damn," he said. Goyle looked up.

"What do you mean?" Goyle asked. Harry rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

"It's raining!" Harry exploded. "I wanted to send a letter tonight, and it's raining!" Goyle sat confused. "She hates to fly in the rain!" He was screaming at Goyle when Ron walked in.

"Hey, what's up?" Ron called out. Harry spun on him.

"Oh, look! The Prefect's back! Goyle, you're saved." Harry started to leave and then stopped just in front of Ron. "I know that silver badge doesn't mean anything on Malfoy's chest. I would have thought it meant something more to you." He descended the stairs and strolled across the common room, heading to leave, when Hermione caught him by the arm.

“Harry! Where are you going?” she asked.

“Dinner,” he said, “if everyone will just leave me alone.” She let go of his arm.

“Look, Ron’s just gone up to change. He’ll only be a minute.”

“A minute for Ron Weasley, is a minute I don’t have,” he fired.

“Don’t tell me you two had another fight,” she sighed. “What was it this time?”

“Hermione, I don’t have time to play twenty questions,” he started to leave. “If you want to know so much... to know EVERYTHING, ask Ron.” He looked back at her as the Fat Lady’s portrait swung open. “But you two have been such exquisite liars lately, I doubt he’ll be able to tell you the truth. And if he did, would you believe it?” He left, Hermione calling after him.

Harry started toward the Great Hall, but he realized he wasn’t the least bit hungry. He was headed down the first floor corridor when he changed his mind. Instead, a visit to see the only loyal friend he had was in order. Ten minutes later he walked into the owlery. “Hedwig!” he called. The snowy owl flew down and landed on Harry’s arm. “Hello, girl,” he whispered. He sat on a bench stroking her feathers. “Tell me girl, what’s it like to be the only white owl in here? Do the other owls tease you?” He looked up at all the different owls. So many colors, shapes and sizes. Erol buzzed down to see if maybe he could carry a letter somewhere. Hedwig cooed a reproach for the intrusion. “It’s okay girl, he just wants to help. We need more Erols girl... a lot more.” He stroked her feathers for quite some time, when he heard footsteps.

“Harry?” called a girl’s voice. “Is that you?” It was Ginny Weasley, a pack hung over one arm and she held a parchment in her hand.

“Go on girl,” he whispered to Hedwig, and she flew back to roost. He tried to muster a smile. “Hi Ginny. How was the first day back?”

"Awful and wonderful in one," she said whimsically. "I've already got more homework than I ever had before. But Dean says he'll see me through to the O.W.L.S., and something in his voice tells me he will," she smiled. Erol, hearing her speak started buzzing madly about. "I hate to send him out in this weather, but I promised to write Mum." She attached the parchment to Erol's leg and he was off. "She'd only think the worst if I didn't write."

"I don't know," Harry said watching Erol disappear into the rain. "After last night, she may anyway."

"Well, I didn't really go into that much detail," she muttered looking down at the floor.

"Ginny Weasley! Perhaps you should be in Slytherin!" Harry joked.

"She'll find out soon enough, she always does, and with Dad where he is at the Ministry now, there's not something unusual that happens he doesn't hear about." There was an awkward silence as the two began to look up at the owls overhead. "Dean told me about Malfoy's face. He saw it in Potions this morning." Harry sat back down on the bench and looked at his hands.

"You saved Cho's life Harry," she said sitting down next to him. "He deserved what he got." Harry shook his head. He wasn't going to have the one bright light in this school filled with rubbish.

"Ginny, that's a lie. I didn't save Cho's life. He goaded her in his own slimy way. She drew her wand on him first. If she would have just..." Harry took a long breath. "Well, she'd be having dinner with her brother in the Great Hall right now, instead of..." He buried his head in his hands. "He wasn't after her. He was after me. He's always been after me. Or, maybe it's been the other way around, I don't know."

"You did the right thing, Harry. Padma told me what happened. If she lives, it'll be because you took Malfoy down."

"If she dies, it'll be because I sat down next to her." He looked up, and tears were falling down his face. "I'm a walking disaster waiting to happen. Even you...You almost died last year Ginny."

“Harry, I...”

“No! YOU ALMOST DIED! And why? Because I was an arrogant ass. Sitting with me right now, you put your life in danger. Don’t you see that?”

“What? You don’t think we all know you’re Number One on Voldemort’s hit list. Do you think we just hang around because you make a great Seeker?” she smiled. “Tell me Harry, if it were me, if Voldemort was flying through that window right now to come after Ginny Weasley, where would you be?” Harry looked up to the window. The rain had stopped as the moon broke through the clouds.

“Right here,” he whispered. Ginny took his hand.

“Exactly. And that’s where I am Harry. That’s where over half the school is. Right here beside you.” He wiped his face with his left sleeve. “You saved my life Harry, I’ll never forget that.” Harry tried to manage a smile.

“I’m sorry Ginny. I can’t seem to get a hold of myself this year. My compass keeps spinning every which way trying to find true north.” A Great Horned Owl flew in from outside. Harry took a deep breath. “I wish Sirius were here,” he sighed.

The two remained for some time, Ginny content to sit with Harry and let him look out the window or watch the occasional owl swoop from one roosting spot to another. Finally, it was Harry who broke the silence.

“Ginny,” he said, “You and Dean, you’ve got something special there.” A grin broke out across her face.

“I think so,” she said, “Why? What’s he told you?” Harry began to smile back.

“He doesn’t have to say anything. You can see it in his eyes every time he’s with you, or talks about you.” It was his turn to hold her

hand. "Don't let Ron spoil it for you. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Don't worry about me, Harry," she grinned, "I can handle Ron just fine, thank you very much." Then her face turned down somewhat. "Have you noticed?"

"Noticed what?" Harry asked.

"Ron, he's, well, he's not looking too well. I know he was busy this summer and all with... well things. But he's gotten worse since we've been here. He looked dreadful at dinner tonight. I didn't say anything to Mum, but it's starting to worry me a bit. You'll look out for him, won't you?" Harry stiffened at the question. He stood and began to brush the white down from off his clothes.

"I think Ron can look out for himself. He'll be fine." The words were a bit sharper than he would have liked. He was sure she'd note the tone, and he didn't want that. Ginny stood as well.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," she said. "Well, Dean will be wondering where I ran off to. I told him to meet me in the library an hour ago." She walked over to Harry. "You know," she said, her voice low, "when you're lost, and you need to find true north," she took his hand and held it to his chest, "look right here." He could feel his heart beat against her hand holding his.

"Eh, hem," cleared a voice from behind Harry. Harry turned to see Dean Thomas.

"Dean!" Ginny called. "I'm so sorry, I thought I'd only be a minute and, well," she walked over to Dean taking him by the hand, "I met Harry here, and we got to talking and one thing led to another and...."

"I can see that," Dean said in voice that was a bit too cold. "Are you two finished with one thing and another?"

"Ginny was just leaving, Dean," Harry said apologetically. "It's all my fault. I started going off about Quidditch and our chances this year if

we applied the right strategy and all. She was kind enough to listen to far too many game plans.” Dean looked satisfied with the explanation.

“Well, it’s getting late,” Dean said. “We only have about thirty minutes before we need to be back.” The two started to leave.

“Ginny,” Harry called. “Do you have anything I can write with?”

“Sure Harry,” she said. She pulled parchment and a quill from her pack and handed them to Harry. “I’ll need the quill back when you’re done if you don’t mind.”

“Thanks,” he said. Dean and Ginny left arm-in-arm each smiling at the other. Harry went back to the bench and started to write.

Gabriella,

One day has passed since we last saw each other, and already I miss you miserably. My mind has turned to Christmas. It’s been a long time since I’ve been home for the holiday. I suspect Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia will love the news when I tell them.

The first night back was bloody awful. A close friend was attacked and put in the hospital. They say some of the ‘criminals’ here are incurable. I hope I can change that in some small way. I was going to go to bed tonight angry and upset over what’s happened here during the last twenty-four hours. But, how can I go to bed angry, knowing that I have someone I love so much waiting for me when I return. My only sadness is that you’re not at my side right now.

I love you... always,

Harry

Harry walked Hedwig to the window and she flew off with the letter into a starry night. The clouds were thinning, and the moon bathed the grounds with a faint glow. Smoke was billowing from Hagrid’s cabin. “So quiet,” Harry thought as he rubbed his right forearm. He scanned the horizon over the Forbidden Forest. Somewhere, out there in the darkness, the pieces were being positioned. Pawns in

what might be the greatest war of the age. It seemed silly to think that love would be enough.

Chapter 19 - Hidden at Honeydukes

The castle corridors were deserted as Harry quickly made his way down from the owlery. He was rushing to make it back to the Gryffindor common room before curfew. The last thing he needed was to get caught by Filch and lose fifty points for Gryffindor. He was passing by the spiral staircase to Dumbledore's office when it opened up. Draco Malfoy stepped out and, seeing Harry before him, the blonde stopped. His head was no longer covered. Now, a simple flesh colored patch hid the scar beneath.

"Hey, Draco," Harry called, briefly waving his right hand. "Love to chat, but I've things to do." And he continued to walk briskly down the corridor, half wondering when Malfoy's hex would strike his back. Instead, Malfoy ran up beside him and kept pace down the corridor.

"Your precious Dumbledore couldn't remove it," he drawled. "How pathetic is that? And we're supposed to feel so safe with that old fool watching over us."

"I already told your crony, Draco," Harry said calmly as he started up the stairs. "There's only one person in the school who can remove the scar."

"And I suppose that's you!" Malfoy spat. "Okay, Potter, what do you want?"

"And I already told you, Draco," Harry continued as they began down the corridor to the portrait of the Fat Lady. "I can't remove the scar."

"You're a liar!" Malfoy screamed reaching for his wand. But before his hands ever touched it, Harry spun and had his wand pointed directly between Malfoy's eyes.

"I don't have time to play tonight, Draco," he whispered. Calmly Harry flicked his wand and uttered, "Expelliarmus." With a flash, Draco's wand flew fifty feet backward down the corridor. "Perhaps tomorrow, Draco, goodnight." Harry turned, walked to the portrait, whispered the password and passed through.

As he entered the common room, the first site to catch his eye was Dean and Ginny studying together by the fire. Everyone else had gone to bed, probably making up for the lack of sleep the night before. He'd half expected to see Hermione and was half glad she wasn't there.

"Hi Harry," Ginny said brightly. "Did you get your letter off?"

"Yeah, thanks Gin." Harry walked over to the two holding hands. "Here's your quill." On Dean's notes he saw intricate doodles of a girl flying on a broom. Not so much doodles, rather detailed drawings done in black ink. It was clearly Ginny Weasley. "Puts Goldstein's sketches to shame," Harry thought. He turned to Dean. "Chaser, or Seeker?" he asked pointing to the artwork. Dean smiled blushing slightly.

"Chaser I think," he said with a grin, adding a bit of shading to one of his drawings. When he lifted his quill, the figure flew to a ring tossing the Quaffle through. "She'll give Katie a run for her money this year, I'd say." Ginny shoved Dean on the side smiling.

"As if," she said holding Dean's gaze in her own. Dean broke off a piece of chocolate he had with him and placed it in her mouth. Harry excused himself and started up the stairs. Ron and Goyle were already asleep, or at least pretending to be asleep. Harry undressed and crawled into bed. Goyle let out a small sigh, and Harry had to smile.

As Harry's head hit the pillow, he realized it had been days since he'd concentrated on clearing his mind. The lack of practice and emotions of the day made tonight's efforts more difficult. The last thing he let go of was the vision of a white owl flying toward the waxing moon.

As Harry looked on, the moon turned full, and he heard a howling out on the grounds below. Smoke still billowed from the chimney of Hagrid's hut and, as it filled the air, the moon flushed blood red. There was a flapping of wings in the distance, a rhythmic swoosh... swoosh... swoosh... deep, even, heavy strokes. Not the wings of an owl. Suddenly the air was filled with flame and two glowing eyes were coming toward Harry. He stepped back from the window... swoosh...

swoosh... swoosh. A Hungarian Horntail filled his view. Just before it was upon him, it turned sharply upwards, spinning to its left in a giant arc across the glowing sky. Another burst of flame shot from the creature's mouth, which opened wider and wider until it swooped and swallowed the burning moon in its mouth. Instantly all was dark. Just the sound of crickets filled the air. "I know this place," Harry thought.

And then he heard a voice calling his name. "Harry?" And again louder, "Harry!" It was Dean rocking his shoulder. "Come on sleepy head, you'll miss breakfast if you sleep any longer." Harry looked around. He was in bed, the morning light filling their room. Neville was just waking as well.

"Where's Goyle and Ron," he asked.

"They left about twenty minutes ago," Dean answered. "They're getting downright chummy if you ask me. At least I hope they are. Maybe it'll get Ron off my back." Harry sat up rubbing his eyes. Neville wandered down the hall to the shower.

"Dean, if it's one thing you don't need to worry about, it's Ron Weasley. He's all bark and no bite," Harry said dismissively. "Anyway, it doesn't bother Ginny, it shouldn't bother you." Dean sat down across from Harry.

"It does bother me, Harry," he said earnestly. "I... love her. I don't know. We might have a chance to make something of ourselves in a few years. How can that happen if I don't have the support of her family?"

"There are seven Weasley children, Dean," said Harry firmly. "Getting them to agree on what to eat for breakfast in the morning is damn near impossible. Don't expect one-hundred percent approval." He stood and started for the shower. "Her parents like you, that's what counts."

"They do?" Dean brightened. Harry smiled nodding. "Really?" Harry left Dean grinning, and punching the air in a sign of victory.

As Harry entered the Great Hall for breakfast, he saw that Hermione had an open space next to her. Ron sat across the table. He was scanning for somewhere else to sit when Katie Bell called him to sit down next to her. With Angelina graduating, she had been selected to lead the team this year. Harry felt he'd been slighted a bit. He knew far more about Quidditch than Katie.

"Morning Harry," she said with a smile. "I heard you bought a new Caduceus, is that true?" Harry nodded. "Fantastic!" she whooped. "There's only one other in the whole school." Harry's eyes looked up over his buttered toast. He was a bit surprised. "Malfoy," she said answering his unspoken question. His eyes rolled into the air. She leaned closer to him much as Anthony Goldstein had done in Basic Apparation, her voice becoming almost conspiratorial. "Listen, I want to have tryouts this weekend. We can't wait any longer to get a team together. We won last year, but by sheer luck. The whole school was out of whack. We have to be on top of our game this year, Harry. We've got to!" Her voice was a bit high pitched. Oliver would have been proud.

"The thing is," she continued, "I know some of the others might think they're on the team just because they played last year. But there's no way Ginny Weasley's better than you at Seeker."

"Katie," Harry began, "I should tell..."

"Just hear me out Harry," she cut him off. "I see you at Seeker, me at Chaser and, well, I know he's your friend and all plus he seemed to get it together last year so Ron at Keeper. That leaves two Beaters and two Chasers to look for at tryouts.

"I gave my Firebolt to Ginny," Harry said putting a slice of ham in his mouth. The bit of news had Katie recalculating in her mind. And while Katie was performing her own bit of Quidditch math, Harry was wondering about Ron. He looked down the table. Hermione had left and Ron was looking back at them. Certainly he knew what they were talking about. Could he hear Katie's mind? Harry waved at Ron to come over. If he was going to listen, he might as well do it properly.

"Okay, she's in at Chaser. But that's still three positions." Ron sat down next to Katie.

"Okay, Ron," Harry said, "You're in at Keeper, Ginny's in at Chaser. Tryouts are Saturday for the other three. Start asking around and see if anybody's been working on their flying this summer." A grin broke out across Ron's face and then a look of eagerness.

"What about Goyle?" he asked.

"What about, Goyle?" Katie rolled back.

"He's played Beater," Ron returned. "He's pretty good at it."

"You're not serious," Harry howled. "He'd throw the game in about two minutes, knocking a Bludger right at the back of my head!"

"Well, he said he was interested is all," Ron replied.

Katie was quiet. The wheels were turning again. "We only have the one game this term," she said pensively. "Ravenclaw." She looked over at the Ravenclaw table. I hear they hexed him and his friend, Crabbe, pretty good as they tried to protect Malfoy. Crabbe just left the hospital wing. As much as Malfoy hates you, Harry, maybe Goyle hates Ravenclaw more. I don't know. We can let him tryout anyway."

"But..." Harry started.

"Let's just let Goyle fly Saturday, Harry. No harm looking is there?" Harry looked at Katie and then shot Ron a look of pure lightning.

"You're the captain, Captain," Harry quipped. "I've got to go, class is about to start." He stood up and so did Ron. They both had Charms this morning. Harry looked at Ron, and Ron looked back. But instead of turning to go, Harry walked toward the head table, leaving Ron to shrug and walk away. Professor Flitwick was just preparing to go teach the very same class.

“Professor,” Harry called. “May I have a word, sir?” Professor Flitwick smiled and nodded. “Any news, sir? About Cho?” The smile left his face and he walked over to Harry placing a hand on his arm.

“Walk with me, Mr. Potter,” Professor Flitwick said. The two left the Great Hall and started down the corridor. Professor Flitwick opened a door and the two walked into an empty classroom. Professor Flitwick was one of the more emotional teachers at Hogwarts, but there was no sadness on his face that Harry could read. Yet, what it was he couldn’t tell. He asked Harry to sit, and the words started his heart racing.

“You’ve always impressed me, Harry,” Professor Flitwick said sitting in a chair next to him. “I don’t think I’ve ever told you before. I’ve seen all too well what you’ve been through. Particularly last year.” A hint of fire flashed in his eyes. Again he held Harry’s arm. “You saved Cho’s life. You know that, don’t you?” Hearing the words that she would live, Harry thought he’d be jubilant. But, why then were they here? Why not just say Cho’s fine and she’ll be at school tomorrow? His palms began to sweat.

“And?” Harry asked. “When does she come back?” At these words, Professor Flitwick’s eyes began to fill with tears.

“Not for awhile, I’m afraid.” He paused. “Her brain has been badly injured, Harry. She’s not... she’s not Cho anymore.” Harry stood up.

“What do you mean she’s not Cho anymore?” he asked, his voice shaking. “Marietta said she was asking about me when they went in to St. Mungo’s. She said... the healer said....” He had to sit again.

“I know she meant a great deal to you, Harry,” Professor Flitwick squeaked. “You meant a great deal to her too. The healers call it a lasting echo in the brain. It’s all she does right now... ask about you. She doesn’t know her name. She doesn’t recognize her family. She only asks ‘Is Harry okay?’ over and over again.”

“I’ve got to see her then!” Harry exclaimed. “Let her know I am okay, maybe... maybe...”

“Yes, yes, the healers have mentioned that, but not yet. It’s still too soon. Perhaps you can see her in a week or two, if the behavior continues.” Professor Flitwick rubbed his eyes with his hands. “We must be getting to class, Harry. It has not been a very fine start this year, and I’m afraid it promises to get worse.” Harry stood with Professor Flitwick, his knees were weak, but still he felt like doing something, anything.

“Professor?” Harry asked. “Malfoy? Aren’t they going to do something with him for what he did to her? Let him join his father?” Professor Flitwick shook his head.

“I’m afraid not,” he replied. “The accident occurred on the Hogwarts Express and hence school grounds. The Headmaster has decided to wait, pending Cho’s final outcome.”

“Wait?” Harry sputtered. “Wait for what? For him to kill someone else?”

“Now Harry,” Professor Flitwick chided. “As hungry for power and attention as Mr. Malfoy is, even I don’t believe he’d deliberately try to kill someone.” He stood. “Come now, we’re both going to be late.” Just before they left, Professor Flitwick looked once more in to his eyes. “I’m sorry Harry, but I have to ask. Did you put the scar on Mr. Malfoy’s face?” Looking back at Professor Flitwick, Harry did not answer. “There are only a handful of students at Hogwarts who could accomplish the feat. There is none I know of that could keep me, or the Headmaster from removing the mark.”

“I can’t remove it,” Harry answered. Professor Flitwick nodded his head. He was turning the words in his mind.

“Very well,” he said.

They walked together down the corridor to the Charms class. Just before they entered Professor Flitwick held Harry’s arm one last time. “Harry, let the Headmaster sort this out. It’s not your job.” Harry only shrugged following Professor Flitwick into class.

The Charms class was full. Owing to the fact that Professor Flitwick was an excellent teacher, quite a few students had made it into his N.E.W.T., including Ron. A quick scan of the class saw Hermione with Ron saving a seat in front and a thin longhaired blonde next to an open seat in back. This time Harry specifically selected to sit with Malfoy.

"Potter, really," Malfoy drawled. "Your mudblood girlfriend saved you a seat in front. Don't ruin this class for me too." He was as arrogant as ever.

"You didn't kill her, Draco," Harry whispered through gritted teeth. "She's going to live." Malfoy glanced at Harry, for an instant, he thought he saw a look of relief, or was it disappointment?

"Whatever," Malfoy sneered.

"Only problem is, you've put her in St. Mungo's forever," Harry hissed. "You killed her brain, Draco. Now, it's your turn."

"Stop it Potter," Malfoy snapped. A few students glanced back to look; one was Anthony Goldstein. Malfoy lowered his voice. "I don't know where you come off calling me by my first name, but stop it. I hate you and you hate me. Leave it that way."

"Never be afraid of a name, Draco," Harry chimed feeling the blood boil in his veins. "I explained that to your father last year, just before, well you know." Along with the rest of the class Malfoy's wand was laying out on the table before him. He reached down gripping it, his knuckles turning white. In the front, Professor Flitwick had begun demonstrating a charm to make inanimate objects move in an animated way. Harry's mind flashed to the statues in the fountain at the Ministry of Magic that saved his life last year.

"Tell me Draco, does it hurt? Does the snake sink its fangs into your cheek at night, or does the sword drip blood from your chin." Draco pulled his wand in close. "You do look pretty horrific you know. A freaking monster is what McGonagall saw, wasn't it? You could see it in her eyes. You can see it in everyone's eyes, Draco. What does

Pansy think? Merlin knows I think..." Malfoy jumped to his feet, but Harry remained seated keeping his back to Malfoy.

"Perfect," Harry breathed to himself, still facing away from Malfoy. The commotion caused students in front of Harry to look back. Professor Flitwick looked up as well. Malfoy's words reverberated throughout the class.

"Stupefy!"

A searing pain hit Harry between the shoulder blades, and everything went black. In the next instant, a bright light began to fill Harry's eyes. He was at the pool. In the water was Gabriella in a black and red two-piece suit.

"They tell me that you're brave, Harry," she said, and then smiled up at him from the water. "Jump in then... chicken!" She splashed him. The water hit Harry's legs and began to burn. Red welts began to spring up all over.

"Here, let me take care of that," Emma called from behind him. She was dressed in black robes and a blue glow emanated from her wand.

"What's she doing Harry!" Gabriella screamed. "She's... she's some kind of witch! Stop her Harry, stop her!" Harry stood up telling Emma she had to leave. Suddenly he slipped and began falling, falling backwards towards the water and Gabriella. He was waiting for the burning heat. Instead a wave of cold filled his body. Extreme cold. He was getting uncomfortable, freezing, the cold felt like...

He opened his eyes. Professor Flitwick was leaning over Harry, Hermione at his side.

"Well done Ms. Granger," he squeaked. "Mr. Potter, can you stand?" Harry's head was clearing. He knew he could stand, but then remembered his cause.

"Malfoy? Where's Malfoy?" he groaned.

“Mr. Malfoy has been sent to see the Headmaster,” Professor Flitwick replied irritably. “I can’t believe he just stunned you in the back.” Harry made a half-hearted move to stand, but deliberately fell back to the floor, holding his head. Professor Flitwick turned to Ron. “Mr. Weasley, escort Mr. Potter to the hospital wing. Let Madame Pomfrey know that it was a stunning spell.” Ron nodded and reached down to lift Harry.

For a moment Harry hesitated, but he had things he needed to do and this would make it simpler. He reached up and let Ron pull him to his feet. Once they were outside the class and the doors shut, Harry let go of Ron and began walking rapidly down the corridor.

“You’re not hurt?” Ron asked a bit confused.

“Well, I was just stunned in the back, wasn’t I?” said Harry in a biting tone. “But I can walk. Why don’t you just go back to class? I’ll be fine.”

“Professor Flitwick said to take you to the hospital wing,” Ron said.

“Well, I’m not going to the hospital wing, so that would be kind of pointless wouldn’t it.” Harry began to pick up his pace. “How long was I down?”

“Just a few minutes.”

“And how much of a head start does Malfoy have?” They were nearly running.

“Not too much, why?” Harry didn’t reply. They were headed to the corridor leading to Dumbledore’s office when Ron figured it out. “You’re going to attack Malfoy!”

“Wow! You’re a mind reader,” said Harry with a smirk. “Now, leave!” he spat. “I told you we’re through. The sooner you get that through your thick skull the better.” But Ron would not leave. Together, they rounded the corridor in the final hall when they saw Malfoy. Quickly, Harry pulled in behind a column. He did not want Ron here for this. Maybe he should have asked for someone else. The hall to

Dumbledore's office was deserted. From the windows high above, the morning sun lit up the fine paintings and tapestries hanging on the walls. There was no time to wait. Harry pulled his wand. This time, Malfoy would be hit in the back.

"Stupefy!" he cried, but before the words even left his lips, Malfoy seemed to buckle in pain reaching for his face. Harry felt an almost empathetic searing rise into his right arm, pinching him about the neck. He fell to one knee.

"Stupefy!" cast Ron. The streak of red light was intense and this time true, striking Malfoy in the back before he could turn to see his assailants. Malfoy collapsed to the ground. Groaning, Harry rose back to his feet.

"Okay Ron, you're in it now," said Harry through gritted teeth. "I'll watch, Malfoy. Go get my cloak from my trunk and get back here fast!" Ron sped away as Harry turned to Malfoy and whispered, "Mobilicorpus." Then he hid Malfoy out of the way behind a huge planting box. Minutes later Ron returned, his brow wet with sweat, Harry's cloak in his hands. Carefully, the two placed it over Malfoy's body and proceeded down the corridor. They had just made it to the statue of the one-eyed witch when class got out.

Harry whispered, "Dissendium," just as a throng of third years turned their way. A moment later, the two were in the cavern beneath Hogwarts and all was quiet.

"Whoa," Ron breathed. "Where is this place?"

"It's time for you to go now Ron," Harry breathed heavily. "I've got it from here. He should be out for a few more minutes. That'll be all the time I need."

"Look," Ron said, "let me just make sure you finish what you're doing safely, and when we're back... whatever." The redhead shrugged his shoulders. Harry looked down the empty and dark cavern. He could use the help, particularly if Malfoy woke early.

“Okay, let’s go.” Ten minutes later, they had parked Malfoy’s body in the basement of Honeydukes. They covered their tracks as best they could and began their way back to Hogwarts.

“Brilliant, Harry,” said Ron beaming. “He was sent to the Headmaster, but instead leaves school for Hogsmeade. They’ll kick him out for sure!” Harry nodded, but he was not smiling. For once he knew he’d played the better hand, but there was no joy in his triumph. “With Malfoy out, Dumbledore’s vision of school unity might just come true,” Ron said climbing back up the stairs behind the one-eyed witch. The two dusted themselves off and walked out into the corridor.

“I’m off to the hospital wing,” Harry said. “I’ve got this period free, then lunch. I’ll just have Madame Pomfrey look me over so I have my alibi.”

“To the hospital wing then!” said Ron. He smiled at first then, seeing Harry’s eyes, his own face fell. “We’ll just say I dropped you off at the door. I’m late for...” But Ron had the period free too. “Well, I’ll go see what we missed in Charms.” And he walked the other way down the corridor.

The hospital wing still had some students recuperating from the first night at Hogwarts. When Madame Pomfrey saw Harry she was immediately concerned. Too concerned, Harry thought. It was as if she’d been waiting for him to enter.

“Mr. Potter,” she called, “over here, over here, lie down.” How did she know he was hurt? “Don’t just stand there let me have a look.” Harry removed his robes and sat down on one of the beds. “Ms. Granger was here quite some time ago looking for you. She said you had been stunned in the back! Why didn’t you come straight away?” Harry’s heart quickened. What more had Hermione said?

“I was a little nauseous,” he said. “Ron helped me make it to the bathroom. I felt better after a drink of water though. In fact, I’m feeling much, much better now.”

“Certainly, dear. Let me see your back.” Harry lifted his shirt. “Yes, there’s where it hit you. This is going to hurt, I can promise you that.”

She held up her wand. "But, it will be over in a flash. Hold still you're very bruised." A tingling sensation prickled the center of Harry's back, and then what felt like a knife plummeted down his veins to the fingertips on his right hand.

"Aye!" Harry yelled. For a moment he felt an overwhelming urge to crush the healer between his hands, but before he could act Madame Pomfrey was walking away.

"It's still a bit red, one moment," she said. "Let me see..." Madame Pomfrey walked to a cupboard and pulled out a bottle of some potion. The door opened, it was Hermione.

"Harry, you're here!" she panted, perspiration beading on her forehead. Clearly, she'd been running. "I just saw Ron on the way to lunch and he said you'd made it to the hospital wing. He said you two..." Harry shot her a stabbing glance and she stopped abruptly. "...you two made it here as fast as you could."

"Yes," Harry said. "I was a bit sick, but I'm fine now."

"Let me determine that, Mr. Potter," Madame Pomfrey scolded. She walked around Harry to apply the potion. "Oh my!" she exclaimed. "I... I don't understand. It was as red as a beet just a minute ago." Her finger rubbed the skin between Harry's shoulder blades. "It's perfect," she breathed. "That's not possible." After a few more seconds, Harry pulled his shirt down.

"Perfect sounds pretty good to me Madame Pomfrey," he said brightly. "Don't you think Hermione?" Hermione smiled, but a bit nervously.

"Perfect is a wonderful diagnosis," she said. "You're a miracle worker, Madame Pomfrey, a miracle worker." Helping Harry off the bed, she grabbed him by the right arm.

"Don't!" he grimaced. His shirtsleeve had been pulled up somewhat, and he quickly pulled it down. But a glance at Hermione's eyes and Harry knew she'd seen it. At least she'd seen part of it. Harry tried to laugh. "Don't pinch like that Hermione." Madame Pomfrey looked at him incredulously.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay, Mr. Potter?” she asked reaching for his right arm. Harry pulled away.

“Absolutely, Madame Pomfrey.” He smiled broadly, wondering what could possess him to want to hurt her in any way. “Just caught my funny-bone is all. Hermione’s right, you are a miracle worker.” Harry grabbed Hermione’s arm this time. “Let’s go Hermione, I’m starved.” Harry tossed his robes back on and the two left Madame Pomfrey examining the unused potion in her hand.

Chapter 20 - A Stunning Defense

The sky on the false ceiling above the Great Hall was dark and threatening. Lightning flashed the room as deafening claps of thunder reverberated off the rock walls. The steady sound of rain was loud and driving. It was difficult to hear anything. When Hermione and Harry arrived, most everyone else had already finished lunch. A few students remained studying or chatting with friends. Ron was nowhere to be seen. The two of them selected an unpopulated spot at the Gryffindor table. At the end of the table, Colin Creevey seemed to be explaining a wand movement to his brother Dennis. Another clap of thunder boomed in the Great Hall. Harry looked down at the table before him.

"Is there any chance we can still get a bite to eat?" he requested. Instantly plates appeared before both of them. Roast beef and fried potatoes with crescent rolls and a small green salad. A large cup of milk for Harry, slightly warm as he liked it and an iced tea appeared before Hermione.

"Have you seen Dobby?" Hermione asked.

"Don't you have something else to ask?" Harry quickly shot back. He was in no mood to discuss house elves, even Dobby. His years with Hermione told him where they were about to go, and part of him felt that the great secret keeper seated across the table was unworthy of the secret she was about to be given.

"Well," Hermione scanned around her, "your arm?" She left the question simple and vague.

"You've seen it before, Hermione," Harry said not wanting to make this easy. He tried to guide the direction of the conversation. "But why talk about my arm? What about being able to cast spells without a wand? Have you found anything out about that?" For a moment, she sat thinking silently.

"Malfoy," she breathed, "his... his face." And then her eyes began to stare into space again. Harry simply waited; he was used to this. A minute passed and as quickly as her mind had left, it had returned.

She looked at him squarely in the eyes. "Without a wand?" she asked. Her eyes were large and disbelieving.

"You healed the hand that did it," he said flatly. "Thank you by the way," he said and smiled. "Are you going to be a healer? You'd be brilliant at it you know." He was about finished with his lunch, but Hermione had barely had two bites. "Are you going to eat that roll?" he asked. Her eyes darted up and down the table again. The Creevey brothers had left.

"Can I see?" she whispered, her face full of anticipation. Harry smiled again.

"You'll be disappointed," he said. He reached for the sleeve on his right arm and lifted. The scar was gone. Hermione's face fell. "I saw it first after St. Mungo's. It appears and disappears, and I don't understand why. It appeared just now in the hospital, and when it did, it burned. It always burns," he said, rubbing his arm with his finger. "I don't know how, but I imbedded the same mark into Malfoy's face. I wanted to punish him somehow, to make him understand what it's like to be different and that's all I could think of... take my scar." Harry's face began to redden as the anger began to fill his heart. "Do you know what he's done to her?" Hermione nodded.

"Ron told me," she consoled reaching out to hold his hand. "Malfoy's nothing but poison," she spat. "Just stay away from him, Harry. He's on his way to being a Death Eater, I'm certain." Her words held a solidity about them that contained more certainty than Hermione usually gave when talking about others and they certainly made Harry feel better. For a moment they sat like that, hand in hand, then she let go of Harry's hand and stood. "We can talk more later. It's getting late. Professor Tonks will be waiting," she said with a grin. Harry stood as well. Instantly their plates disappeared and the table was clear.

They were actually a bit early to Defense Against the Dark Arts. On the way to class, Hermione had told Harry about the rarity of his ability and how his wand would still act as an amplifier to his powers. "Be very careful at how you cast spells with it," she warned him. They were laughing about how this might work as an engorgement charm against his Uncle Vernon when Ron stepped in to class. He walked to

the front to sit down next to Harry, but when he did Harry stood up and walked to the back of the room.

“Harry?” Hermione asked confused. She began to walk back when Ron held her shoulder. She looked at him and he looked down. At the same time Tonks entered the classroom. Her robes were perfect, very professorial; her hair was dark and trim. She looked nothing like the Tonks Harry knew.

“Good afternoon class,” she called with a light tone to her voice.

“Good afternoon Professor Tonks,” they all chanted in unison. The chorus stopped her in her tracks halfway to the front of the class.

“You sound as if you’ve been practicing,” she said, a bit put off by the response.

“We have,” replied Dean. “Professor Umbridge used to...”

“Let’s stop there,” Tonks interrupted, “shall we?” She continued to the front of the class. Next to her stood a large suit of armor. “There are a few things we should get straight right away. First, any sentences beginning with the words ‘Professor Umbridge’ will lose your house 5 points. Is that understood?” The room clapped. “Second, when you enter this class you will have your wands ready. Is that understood?” The classroom cheered. “Finally, any student casting an unfriendly spell or hex on a fellow student without my explicit instruction will be removed from this N.E.W.T.” Her voice was steel on this matter.

“This is not the time for petty bickering, or backstabbing squabbles. I’ve left the battle to be here, to teach you what you’ll need to know in the days to come. Do not make me regret my choice.” She took off her outer robe to reveal a tight fitting duelist vest. “There is very little time and far too much to learn. We have Mr. Potter to thank that you are more advanced than most classes entering the N.E.W.T., but I promise that I will press you further.” With her wand she began moving furniture around, clearing the front of the class. “I said have your wands ready!” she barked and with a flick of her wrist Ron’s hair had turned purple. There were a few laughs, but immediately everyone had their wands in hand.

"Where is Mr. Malfoy?" she asked scanning the room.

"He was sent to see Professor Dumbledore after he attacked Harry in Charms," Hermione replied.

"Good riddance," muttered Anthony Goldstein. Tonks appeared to be disturbed by the news of Mr. Malfoy's absence, but what it was she wouldn't say.

"Now," she continued, "who among you has seen You-Know-Who?" Instantly, all heads turned to Harry. "Not a very pleasant distinction Mr. Potter. Tell us, what does he look like." Harry sat frozen. "Mr. Potter, is he recognizable, any interesting features that might make him unique? Or should we all be afraid of every cloaked figure we see at night?"

"You'd know," he said.

"I'm sorry Mr. Potter, but we couldn't hear in front."

"I said," his voice rising louder and pitching higher, "you'd know." He stood. "He's re-born with help from the milk of his snake. And his face shows it. His eyes are red, the pupils slit like a snake. His face is flat and pale, his scalp thin and grotesque. Instead of a nose he has two gashes, and when he speaks the voice is itself snakelike," Harry shuddered and sat back down, "high and cold." The faces of those in the class were pale, frozen on his words.

"So Ms. Granger," Tonks broke the silence. "Would you then recognize this evil if you saw it?"

"Yes," said Hermione at once, and then after the slightest pause, "No!"

"Explain," Tonks replied.

"Well, he has other ways to spread his evil, doesn't he?" she began. The Imperius Curse for one. He can also possess people. There may be other methods we don't yet know about."

"It is this same unknown, or the fear of it, that almost destroyed us last time. No one knew whom to trust. Mothers, brothers, Professors, they were all of them suspect. The Sorting Hat explained it well. It is during such times that the greatest battle is from within." She walked back over to the suit of armor. "Still we must remain prepared. You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters have an advantage. What is it?" Hermione's hand shot up, but Tonks called on Anthony Goldstein.

"They can use the Unforgivable Curses," he said, "and we can't." There was a tone of regret in his voice.

"Oh, I don't know. Let's see. Who here has used an Unforgivable Curse?" She scanned the room, and everyone looked at her blankly. Pansy Parkinson who was sitting in the back room looked quite uncomfortable by the question. Then, suddenly, she gasped. Everyone turned. Harry had his hand ever so slightly in the air.

"A Death Eater, I believe. Wasn't it, Mr. Potter? She had just incapacitated me, and killed your uncle." Harry didn't understand why she was doing this. Every question was pointing at him. It was the one thing he didn't want. The one thing he hated more than anything else, to be the center of attention. He almost wished Malfoy was back at his side. Again he nodded.

"Tell us Mr. Potter, what was the curse?" The vision of Bellatrix Lestrange cackling at him played in his mind.

"The Cruciatus Curse," he sighed. Again the classroom murmured.

"Did you hit her squarely, Mr. Potter? Was it a good shot?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I knocked her off her feet." The classroom gasped. Even Hermione was biting her lip. Harry had never told them what happened.

"Mr. Longbottom," Tonks called. "She used the same curse on you, what did it feel like?" Neville sat trembling at the memory.

"Pain," he croaked. "Like my insides were being ripped out."

"So," she continued, "Harry Potter, having been attacked by nearly a dozen Death Eaters, having seen all his friends severely hurt or possibly dead, having seen me possibly dead, and knowing his own uncle was dead, chases a Death Eater into the entrance hall of the Ministry of Magic. He casts an Unforgivable Curse, the Cruciatus Curse, on the very Death Eater he saw inflict all this pain, this death. It knocks her off her feet. And then? Did she scream like Neville describes?" Everyone was silent except Parvati who was sniffing, tears falling down her cheeks.

"No," Harry said. Sitting at his desk, he plunged his face in his hands. "She laughed." Without missing a beat Tonks pressed on.

"Mr. Weasley," she called, "why was there no pain? Was Harry not a strong enough wizard?"

"I... I don't..." he muttered, turning red.

"Mr. Neville, is Harry not smart enough to cast the spell properly?" Neville didn't even try to answer. Hermione raised her hand. "Yes, Ms. Granger?" Hermione stood.

"It's his heart," she said, looking over at him. "Well, he cares. He could never enjoy inflicting that kind of pain. Not even on... never," she ended in a whisper and sat back down.

"Exactly!" She addressed the rest of the class. "Five points for Gryffindor! The Unforgivable Curses are worthless to those who do not enjoy scrambling people's brains, or watching people scream in agony, or savoring death. And hence, they are of no use to those whose hearts seek to restore beauty and goodness to the world." She was walking behind Harry when she paused and then strode to the front of the room.

"There are, however, many other ways to defeat the enemy," Tonks called to the class. "You've learned many spells, hexes and curses. What you haven't learned is strategy. In this class we will take what you've learned in many of your classes and find better, smarter ways to apply it to our ends. There are far better ways to destroy evil than

with an Unforgivable Curse. When we find we must turn to evil to fight evil, we will have lost the war.” She was pacing up and down in front of the class; the students transfixed on her every word. All except Harry, whose head was still in his hands.

“Mr. Potter,” she called, “please come to the front.” The hair on the back of Harry’s neck began to stand up on end. He could feel his blood begin to boil.

“This will only take a moment, Mr. Potter,” she coaxed. He stood defiantly, and ignoring his scowl she placed him at one end of the classroom.

“Well, Mr. Potter, you’ve been stunned in the back once today, let’s see how you fare with a shot to the face, shall we? Wands ready!” She held her wand out straight, and Harry did likewise. “Stupefy!” she called. A shot of red light erupted from the tip of her wand.

“Protego!” The shield charm deflected the beam of light reflecting it off a bookcase, which fell over. There was a collective gasp and then the class cheered. Harry rubbed his right forearm.

“Ms. Parkinson,” Tonks called. “Please come over here.” Pansy, looking around the class almost as if searching for a way to escape, walked over to the suit of armor where Tonks was pointing. “Please, hand me your wand,” Tonks asked. Pansy handed her the wand with a slight look of confusion. Harry stood at one end of the room, Tonks at the other. Between them stood Pansy and the armor.

“Mr. Goldstein,” Tonks called again, “If I were to cast a stunning spell on Ms Parkinson, would Mr. Potter’s Shield Charm work?”

“No,” Anthony sniggered. “But please let one fly, Professor. Malfoy’s absence made my day, but one more Slytherin gone would be like Christmas!” There were a few laughs.

“Ten Points from Ravenclaw.” A handful of Ravenclaws groaned. “I will not tolerate such behavior in my classroom,” Tonks said quietly. “Mr. Weasley, what will Harry do to protect his friend, Ms. Parkinson?” Ron was completely lost.

“Erm, well... er.”

“Fascinating. Well, let’s find out. I hope you have your thinking hat on today Mr. Potter. Wouldn’t you agree Ms. Parkinson?” Pansy began to shake. The class was shocked at what they were about to see. If the next spell was anything like the last stunner sent by Tonks, Parkinson would certainly find herself in the hospital wing.

“Wands ready!” Again both wands were held high. Tonks’ voice echoed in the classroom. “Stupefy!” Again red light erupted streaking straight toward Pansy.

“Locomotor Ferratus!” Harry called. In an instant, the suit of armor moved in front of Pansy taking the full brunt of the stunning spell. There was a loud gong and immediately the suit fell to pieces. Pansy, still shaking, looked down at the broken suit of armor. Her face was ghostlike. The room, including Anthony Goldstein, erupted in cheers.

“Very good, Mr. Potter,” said Tonks holding back her emotions. “You see class, there are many ways to defeat your enemy. At our next lesson bring me twenty examples of how you might win a dueling battle without ever casting a spell on your opponent. Class dismissed. There was some clapping as students left their chairs to go to the next class.

Hermione walked over to Harry. “Ron and I have History next,” she said.

“History? Why on earth would you want...” Hermione shot sparks into Harry’s eyes. Ron was already slouching toward the door. “Oh... yeah.” He said, remembering it was one of the few N.E.W.T.S. Ron was accepted in to. “Well, I’ve got Astronomy, but we’ll be meeting at night. Maybe we can talk at dinner or after I’m done watching the cosmos.” He began to walk out with her when Tonks called him back.

“Mr. Potter,” she said, “a word please.” She had started to reposition the furniture to the front of the class with her wand, but then sat on top of her desk. Harry walked over, his face tired. The classroom was empty except for the two of them. “Sorry Harry, but they need to know.

And it wouldn't be the same coming from a Professor." Harry looked up at her.

"I can't stand it you know," he hissed, his arm still aching, "everyone staring at me. By this time tomorrow the whole school will know I used the Cruciatus Curse and failed."

"Good," said Tonks calmly. "If they believe you can't do it, which one of them will try?" Harry looked to his shoes. She reached to his chin and pulled up his head. Her touch was soft, and when his eyes met hers, he was looking back at the Tonks he knew. Her face had a warm glow and a bright smile. "Have you written her since we spoke last?" she asked letting go of his face. Harry nodded. "Good things I hope. Not just doom and gloom, oh woe is me, kind of stuff." Harry couldn't help but smile.

"Has she written back?" Tonks asked. Again Harry nodded. "And...?"

"She wants me to come home for Christmas," he replied. Harry walked over to the shattered suit of armor, waved his wand and reassembled it. "I saw her at King's Cross. Somehow she figured out I'd be there... and when."

"She's smart, Harry, very smart," Tonks said with a smile, "and not bad with martial arts either." Her smile broadened, but Harry wasn't paying much attention.

"I don't want to be here Tonks. I thought maybe... maybe I could do something to try and unite us. Last year, so many houses pulled together against Umbridge. But Slytherin..." his eyes flashed. "They're poison, every last one."

"I don't know, Harry," said Tonks, shrugging her shoulders. She walked over and stroked his hair. He was determined to be upset, but her touch softened him somehow. The ache in his arm began to recede. "Some Slytherins might surprise you."

"Never," he whispered. Tonks dropped her arm and took Harry's hand, examining it as if to see if it had been cleaned properly. She brought her eyes up to meet his.

“Harry, have you tried anything?” she whispered. “About what we spoke in the hospital?” His mind flashed to his encounters with Malfoy, and then with Ron. He shook his head no. “Well,” she said, “you might try something simple. Look in the mirror sometime and try the colour of your eyes.”

Her words hit his heart with a cold splash. He could feel himself turn pale. Could she tell?

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Fine,” he lied. “Just a long day... stunned in the back and all.” Nervously, he began to gather his things to leave. “Erm... I have your Walkman in my room; I forgot to bring it. Sorry.” He was arranging the two books in his pack over and over, his voice shaking.

“Harry, don’t worry about it.” He began to leave. “Hey, are you sure you don’t want to talk about something?” she asked, sounding concerned.

“Nope,” he lied again. He wanted to talk about a million things. His heart and head were bursting with things he wanted to share. But the thought of turning into Voldemort... what would she think? Suddenly he felt very ashamed. “See you later,” he said turning to leave, but as he passed through the door his face ran into a large black cloak barreling through.

“Potter, get out of my way!” spat Professor Snape. He was clearly agitated; sweat was beading on his forehead.

“Professor Snape!” greeted Tonks. “Can I ...”

“Have you seen Mr. Malfoy, Professor?” Snape interrupted. “He’s been missing since lunch.” The concern Harry had seen on Tonks’ face earlier returned.

“No, sir, he didn’t show up for class,” she said. “The students said he had been to see the Headmaster.”

"Students?" hissed Snape, narrowing his eyes. "Potter!" he yelled out the door. Harry had only gone a few feet, in hopes of hearing something. He walked back into the classroom hoisting an angelic quality onto his face.

"Yes Professor?" he said innocently, perhaps too innocently.

"What have you done with Mr. Malfoy?" Professor Snape shot.

"Sir," Harry replied, "the last I saw Draco was just before he stunned me in the back. Surely you've heard I was sent to the hospital wing, Professor?" There was the slightest pause, but Harry could not resist adding. "Professor Dumbledore hasn't expelled him has he?"

"Mr. Malfoy never made it to the Headmaster's office." Professor Snape's eyes were pawing over Harry looking for a chink in the armor. Finally he surrendered. "Very well, Potter." He turned and nodded to Tonks, "Professor." And with a swish of his cloak he was out the door and down the hallway. Tonks looked at Harry.

"I never did much like him as our Head of House." She was twiddling her wand in her hand.

"Snape?" Harry asked. "But... you weren't..." Tonks simply grinned at Harry. Then she nodded her head.

"I don't know if you've noticed, Harry. But I have a propensity to bend the rules a bit." She wore a sly smile. "My dad hated the idea of me being a Slytherin, but becoming an Auror pretty much solved any misconceptions he had about the house. Misconceptions most everyone here has about Slytherins... just because it was Tom Riddle's house."

"And Malfoy's, and Crabbe's, and Goyle's, and Nott's, and..."

"You can run off a list of Hogwarts Alumni who are Death Eaters, and most will be found from the great House of Slytherin," she sighed. "Their curse was their belief in the superiority of pure blood. That's how, at first, they were drawn to Voldemort. Some still believe wildly in his cause, but others have realized that their Dark Lord wants more,

too much more. For those who question, unfortunately, there is no leaving his side, save through death.” Harry listened, but his heart was hardened.

“Yes Harry,” she continued, “Theodore, Vincent, Gregory, and Draco have fathers that are Death Eaters. That doesn’t make them Death Eaters. I would have thought you, of all people, could appreciate the distinction. Merlin knows I saw enough of your Aunt and Uncle to declare you an incurable criminal!” Her face was smiling, and then her twiddling fingers dropped her wand. It hit the floor sending out a jet of sparks at Harry’s feet.

Instinctively Harry lowered his right hand, palm outward. The sparks seemed to hit an invisible wall and ricocheted to the ground as he sidestepped out of the way. Tonks who had been fumbling to grab her falling wand didn’t seem to notice. When she looked up at him, there was no look of surprise, simply an apology.

“Oh... sorry, Harry,” she said. “I’m such a klutz.” He reached down to help her pick up her wand and their hands touched again. “Your hand, it’s red,” she said with concern. Sure enough, his hand had turned red, but had not blistered. “Was it the sparks?” she asked. It was odd, Harry thought. For the second time they were holding hands. She was quite pretty. He realized he was as comfortable holding her hand as he would be his sister’s, if he had one. He looked her in the eyes, and flashed a grin.

“It’s not red,” he whispered. “Look.” And as she looked down, the red faded leaving a golden tan in its place. She brought her eyes up to his.

“Very good,” she said with a smile. “And very sly. Have you been practicing in the mirror?” Harry shrugged.

“Not really,” he said. “But I would like to talk more. Later?” Tonks reached up and touched the silver lightning-bolt in his ear.

“Anytime, Harry. Anytime.” Harry turned to leave again. He was just at the door when Tonks stopped him one last time. “Harry, when I

pushed the needle through your ear and the mirror shattered, everyone screamed, remember?"

"Not everyone," Harry replied. "Gabriella didn't."

"Exactly," said Tonks. She turned her back and began to finish straightening the front of the room.

Chapter 21 - Protecting the Snake

Outside, the rain continued to pour down as Harry made his way back to the Gryffindor common room. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen this much rain. The conditions were miserable, and Harry had to sneer, thinking of Malfoy and what he'd have to do to return to the castle. By now, the Slytherin would be up and about in Hogsmeade. What would he try to do? Harry stopped to look down through a window to the Hogwarts grounds below. Through the glass he could see large puddles forming everywhere, and the lake burgeoning. He leaned his head against the cold glass and thought back to Dumbledore's words of forgiveness, but then quickly shoved them aside. "If they can't help her, Malfoy," he whispered, his words fogging the pane before him, "you'll join her there. I promise you that." A hand touched his shoulder.

"Hey, Harry," he whispered. "Got a minute?" Harry spun ready to fight, and found that it was only Anthony Goldstein, the Ravenclaw's eyes darting up and down the corridor. "We've made a plan if you want in." A smile broke out on his face, and for a moment Harry thought he was looking at the smirk of Lucius Malfoy.

"Plan?" Harry asked. "Really, Anthony you've got to..."

"Great!" Goldstein jumped in not listening to a word. He held Harry's arm and walked over by one of the pillars lining the corridor. "Franklin tells me that every night there's a group of Slytherins that sneak out to one of the classrooms on the second floor for a bit of dueling practice. One of them is Malfoy. But, he seems to have disappeared... somehow," he winked at Harry. "That conveniently drops their best duelist out of the group." Again his eyes shot back and forth scanning the corridor. "I've got six, maybe seven Ravenclaws. We'll be waiting for them tonight at ten. Once they're down, we're taking them into the forest and leaving them there."

"The forest!" Harry exclaimed. "You can't go in there. Do you have any idea..."

"You've been in there loads of times, Harry, and you're fine. We're just going to scare 'em a bit. A night's sleep under the trees will do

'em some good." Goldstein's face was sinister and full of malice. "They'll pay for what they did to Cho. They'll all pay!"

"Anthony, listen," Harry was searching for the words, "it wasn't all of Slytherin. It was Malfoy. You can't just assume..."

"They're all the same, Potter!" he choked. "Luna told us how you fought them off last year. I didn't believe it, not until today in class. And we know their dad's are Death Eaters. We need to get them out... eliminate every... last... ONE!" Harry saw a picture of Vernon flash before him as a bit of foam formed on the corner of Anthony's mouth. "It was a Slytherin that killed your parents, Harry. It was a Slytherin that killed your godfather. Are you in with us, or out?" Harry suddenly found his compass spinning again. The need for revenge was deep and dropping Malfoy in Hogsmeade for a walk home in the rain had not quenched his thirst. "Well?" Goldstein pressed.

"In," Harry breathed. A broad smile broke out on Goldstein's face. It was not a smile Harry shared. Then, quite suddenly, Harry's forehead split open in a searing pain. His hand shot up to his scar. It was on fire. It was the first time he'd felt like this since... since..."

"Harry? Are you okay?" Goldstein asked as Harry bent over in agony.

"What? Are you daft?" Harry yelled. "No, I'm not okay!" He was rubbing his forehead, and as quickly as it had come, the pain receded. He straightened and took a deep breath. Then looking at Goldstein with a scowl he snapped, "Well?"

"Okay... nine-thirty then," he whispered to Harry, "outside the Ravenclaw common room. If you don't show, Harry, we won't wait for you." He slapped Harry on the shoulder. "Tonight we begin to take back Hogwarts."

His head pounding, Harry made it back to common room and he began a feeble attempt at working on what homework he could. Throughout, he was wondering what might have caused the pain in his scar again. Throughout, he knew that, somewhere, something bad was about to happen, if it hadn't already. He went to put his things away as students were making their way in from the last class

of the day. When he entered his room, he found Neville lying in bed, his pillow over his head. "Hey, Neville, everything okay?" he asked. Neville pulled the pillow down to reveal a smile on his face.

"Perfect," he said with an uncharacteristic grin. It was an unusual look for Neville, and an even more unusual response. Harry started to change for dinner and noticed the dragonhead in his trunk. He pulled it out and set it by his bed. "Whoa!" Neville exclaimed. "Cool! Where'd you get it?"

"A friend," Harry said simply. "For my birthday." He handed the dragonhead to Neville.

"It's a Hungarian Horntail, isn't it?" asked Neville. Harry nodded. "Look at the teeth! Does it move?"

"Nope, just a statue." He paused. "A Muggle made it." He was wondering what Neville's response would be.

"Fantastic!" he exclaimed. The acceptance seemed to warm Harry's heart which had been so cold of late. "But... a horntail? How?"

"She saw the statuette I had from the Tri-Wizard tournament." The explanation satisfied Neville, as it had Harry before, but this time the words coming from Harry's own mouth were troubling; something wasn't quite right. Still, not everything slipped passed Neville.

"She?" he asked, handing the dragonhead back. The tone in his voice was obvious and the flush of Harry's skin, and grin on his face gave Neville the answer before Harry said a word. "That makes us two for two, Harry! After Professor Sprout's N.E.W.T. today, Helen Hedera from Hufflepuff pulled me aside. She wondered if I'd like to help her pot some plants tonight."

"She's pretty, Neville," Harry winked, noticing for the first time that Neville seemed to be growing more handsome himself. "Always wears a flower in her hair, right?"

"Yeah," Neville sighed, flopping back on his bed and smiling at the ceiling. Ron and Goyle walked in. Goyle was laughing about something as he entered, but stopped abruptly when he saw Harry.

Harry set the dragonhead down next to his bed, but when he pulled his hand away his finger caught on one of the creature's sharp teeth. "Ow!" he yelped. A small red bead of blood began to prickle to the surface. Harry sucked his finger. When he looked back at its tip, the wound was gone. When he stood up, he saw that Ron had noticed, but no one else.

"Hey, Neville," Harry called. "How 'bout dinner."

"Sure!" Neville said. "I want to hear more about this girl of yours." Harry watched Ron's eyes widen a bit, but he ignored him. "See you guys at dinner," Neville said brightly.

When he and Harry sat to eat, the sky above was still dark and foreboding. The sound of rain filled the Great Hall. His heart growing lighter with the telling, Harry actually opened up about Gabriella in the broadest of terms. It was nice to share with someone else, in a small way at least. Neville seemed to be perfectly accepting.

"You know," Neville said, munching on a dinner roll, "Seamus' dad's a Muggle. You ought to ask him how his folks met." Harry nodded looking over at the Ravenclaw table. Seamus was sitting with a group of Ravenclaws, one of which was Anthony Goldstein. They were huddling together.

"How obvious can you get," thought Harry. He looked up to the head table. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention. Dumbledore was gone, and Professor Snape was actually discussing something with Hagrid. Harry walked over to the group of Ravenclaws.

"Why don't you tell the whole bloody school you're planning something," he hissed. "Break it up." Then, in a louder voice to give a reason for his visit he asked, "Seamus, can I have a word?"

"Sure, Harry!" Seamus stood up and walked over with Harry against a side wall.

"You're not in on this are you?" Harry whispered.

"Why not?" Seamus snapped back under his breath. "Goldstein says you're in. Are you?" Harry looked around the hall. He really wanted to be having the conversation Neville suggested.

"It's not safe Seamus," Harry pleaded. "Just stay out of it."

"They figure the one thing I got bein' from Gryffindor is guts, an' you wan' me teh chicken out?" It was Seamus who was turning scarlet. "I don' back down from a battle, Harry, never. Besides... she's yer girlfriend, ain't she?"

"Yes... I mean, no. It's just that...."

"Yeh better figure it out, Harry, 'cuz we're doin' it tonight, with or witho' yeh." Seamus patted Harry on the chest and walked back to the Ravenclaw table. Harry took off his glasses with one hand and rubbed his eyes with the other. He was suddenly very tired, and still had Astronomy. The cluster of Ravenclaws broke up and began to leave the hall in twos.

There was a clap of thunder that shuddered through the Great Hall, and Harry walked over and said his goodbyes to Neville. He was on his way to the tower when two students burst through the front doors soaked to the bone. Through the opening he saw Dean and Ginny on the steps. He walked over for a closer look.

"Really, Ginny," said Dean smiling, water dripping down his face, "I've got to go. Astronomy will start any minute." The two kissed. The rain was splashing down on them.

"Stay," Ginny teased. "You can't see any stars tonight." Dean caught a glimpse of Harry in the doorway.

"Look," he pointed, "Harry's headed there now. If Professor Sinistra cancels, I'll be right back. I swear." They kissed again, and he pulled himself away. Together, Dean and Harry made their way to the astronomy tower, Dean's shoes squeaking at every step.

As the pair entered the tower a bit late, Professor Sinistra directed them each take a seat. "I'm afraid viewing the stars will be quite out of the question," she said. "I thought we..." and as if someone had turned off the spout, the rain stopped. Suddenly, silence filled the air, and the class gave out a small round of applause. Professor Sinistra walked out onto the parapet and looked up to the sky. "Hmm." She stroked her chin.

For the first half of class, they reviewed planetary information from last year. This year, they were to examine the major gaseous clusters and galaxies. Professor Sinistra kept walking out onto the parapet to check the sky. Finally, she said, "Yes, I think we can have a go." Each student conjured up a telescope and began to examine the stars. For quite some time they compared their charts with their observations. Dean and Harry were working side by side comparing notes and helping each other out with their charts.

"So, Dean," Harry asked, "any more trouble from Ron?" He tried to keep his voice as light as possible.

"Tell you what, Harry," Dean replied, "when Ron stops being an ass, that will be news. Believe me, I'll let you know when it happens." He took his quill and scribbled a note on his star chart. "I've been thinking about what you said though, and you're right." He looked up from his telescope to Harry. "I've got his parents on my side, right?" Harry nodded. "Ginny told Fred and George last year when we were first going out and they've been cool about it." He shook his head. "What am I doing looking for Ron's approval? I don't need it, and neither does she." His voice had been resolute throughout, but wavered at the end.

"What?" Harry asked. "Ginny said that..."

"Oh, I know what she says," Dean interrupted. "I also know what she feels, and it really hurts her that Ron's being so... so... hell I don't know." Harry could feel his blood begin to heat. If Ron was really hurting Ginny in all this, he'd do something about it, and fast.

“Well,” Harry said, trying to keep it light, “I’ll bet he’ll turn around. You’ll see.”

“I hope so,” Dean sighed looking back into his telescope. Harry glanced back into his own eyepiece. A bright swirling galaxy was flanked by countless stars.

“They are beautiful, aren’t they?” he admired.

“Yeah, I think I’d rather draw the galaxies than study them,” Dean whispered. They were almost through when the sound of a cart coming down the flagstone path to the castle broke the silence. The night was dark except for the torches burning outside the castle, and the flashes of lightning that could be seen on the horizon toward Hogsmeade. It was hard to see. A wizard stepped out with a student dressed in class robes. Harry’s heart skipped; was it Malfoy?

“Ladies and gentlemen, that should be enough for tonight,” Professor Sinistra called. “Put your things away. Next time bring with you a description of the ten largest galaxies in the known universe. Three scrolls should suffice.” Harry conjured away his telescope and dashed down the stairs ahead of the rest. He had to see if they’d dragged the Slytherin back to the castle.

When he came around the corner into the castle entranceway, all he could see was the back of Professor Dumbledore. He was speaking to the wizard that had just arrived.

“He didn’t want to come back,” the wizard said. “He’s a bit frightened after what happened to him.” Harry’s heart began to race... it was Malfoy. “But, when he woke up all he could talk about was missing classes.”

“I’m sure,” said Professor Dumbledore, “he can easily make up the material from the classes he’s missed.”

“No!” Harry yelled stepping out into the entranceway. “You can’t let him back in! You can’t.” Dumbledore turned to face him, and when he did so Harry instantly realized his mistake. There stood James Chang, and obviously the wizard next to him was his father.

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore inquired, glancing over his spectacles. "I'm afraid I don't understand." Harry was caught. He'd just given it away, all away. Dumbledore would put the pieces together in an instant.

"Potter?" Mr. Chang asked, walking over to Harry.

"Yes, father," said James. Mr. Chang walked quickly toward Harry, his arms lifted in the air, and then he wrapped them around Harry in a large embrace. Without saying a word he began to sob uncontrollably. Harry put his arms around him in return.

"Thank you my child, thank you," he heaved. "James has told us about your bravery. My daughter owes you her life." He let go of Harry and then put both hands firmly on his shoulders. "You've saved her, Harry."

"No," Harry backed, "no, I didn't. It... it was Hermione. She went and got the healer." He was starting to feel cold. To feel death. It didn't make sense.

"Not on the train, Harry," Mr. Chang continued, "in the hospital. They say she was holding on to something, not wanting to let go. When she finally came around and started asking about you, we knew. You, or the thought of you, brought her back from the dead, Harry." Mr. Chang took a deep breath and wiped his face. Then he addressed Dumbledore again. Harry was growing more nauseous by the minute. "I would like to meet this Malfoy, Professor Dumbledore. I need to know why."

"I'm afraid that's impossible at the moment, Mr. Chang," Professor Dumbledore said calmly. "Mr. Malfoy has been missing since this morning. He was involved in another altercation," Dumbledore's eyes flashed at Harry showing a mark of concern, "and was last seen on his way to my office."

"He has... run away?" James called out.

“Perhaps, young Mr. Chang,” Professor Dumbledore said with a slight twinkle in his eyes, “but I think not.” The wise wizard looked at Harry who was now starting to turn a bit pale. Harry knew the feeling washing over his body, but it couldn’t be. “Harry, the Sorting Hat and I have decided to place Mr. Chang in Gryffindor for this term. He will rotate as the year progresses. Would you help him with his things and escort him to the common room. Find Mr. Weasley, and have him set up a bed for him.”

“Yes, Headmaster,” Harry said weakly, as a cold shiver ran down his spine. He walked over by the door and pulled out his wand to levitate James’ trunk when the door flew open and a body smashed against his arm flinging his wand across the flagstone entranceway.

The intruder was breathing hard and was covered in mud. His clothes were in tatters and the muck was dripping from his robes onto the floor. The thing crawled on all fours toward Professor Dumbledore. Harry couldn’t tell really what it was, much less who. A cold wind blew through the door.

“S-s-ss-sir,” it shivered reaching for the hem of Dumbledore’s robe. “D-d-Demen-Dementors!” Immediately, Dumbledore crouched down holding the person close him.

“Dementors? Where Draco?” he yelled, his voice anxious. Malfoy pulled away from Dumbledore, crawled toward Harry by the door, and pointed. He was shaking violently.

“H-Hogsmeade” he croaked. James had caught the name ‘Draco’ instantly. Standing behind Dumbledore now walking toward the door, the first year was pulling his wand. Mr. Chang was on the far side of the hall. Harry saw it all begin to play out, and reached for his own wand, but it was gone. He could feel the surge in his right arm again.

“Draco!” James screeched. “You’ve killed her!” Malfoy was either unaware he was under attack, or unable to defend himself. In an instant, Harry crouched down close to him holding Malfoy with his left arm and raising his right. “Incendio!” James screamed. A huge blast of flame erupted from his wand. Harry opened his right hand.

“Protego!” Harry called. The flame hit his hand and spread out over him and Malfoy. It was as if they were surrounded in a glass cocoon. The spreading fire was warm, but it didn’t burn. A moment later the flames were out. Mr. Chang had taken his son’s wand and was holding him around the chest. Dumbledore strode to the door and looked back at Malfoy.

“How many Draco?” But Malfoy just sat shivering, unable to speak. Dumbledore strode to a painting of a wizard in the hallway. “Everard,” he said, “sound the alarm. Get as many as you can to Hogsmeade, but make sure the rearguard remains in place.” By this time a group of students had begun to gather around; Hermione was among them. Dumbledore’s voice took command of the situation.

“Ms. Granger, see that James is escorted into the Gryffindor common room. Mr. Potter, find some others and carry Mr. Malfoy to the hospital wing. Don’t use magic, not in his state. Mr. Chang, I believe we have some work to do?” Mr. Chang who was staring at what he’d just seen, handed his son’s wand to Hermione and drew his own, a moment later both he and Professor Dumbledore were flying the carriage toward Hogsmeade.

Hermione walked up to Harry. “What happened?” she asked.

“Look out!” Harry called. James, free of his father, shoved Hermione, and started pounding on Malfoy. “Get him out of here!” Then Harry called to those gathered. “Dementors are attacking Hogsmeade. Alert your Heads of House! Everyone to their rooms!” When he caught sight of Dean in the hall, he called, “Dean! Do you have any more chocolate?”

“Sure, Harry.” Dean walked over and gave Harry a bar. Harry ripped it open and handed it to Malfoy.

“Eat it Malfoy,” he said, but Malfoy glared defiantly at him shivering. “Eat the damn chocolate!” Grudgingly, he took a bite, and the shivering began to calm. He took another. “Dean, can you give me a hand? I can’t carry him myself.” Earlier, there had been three or four Slytherins in the entranceway, but when they’d heard Dementors they had vanished. “There’s loyalty for you,” Harry thought. “Accio wand!”

he called, and his wand flew back in his hand. Dean shot him a glance.

The two Gryffindors lifted Malfoy onto his feet. He was barely able to walk and was still shaking. How he made it from Hogsmeade was a miracle. They were about halfway to the hospital when Dean noticed. The left side of Malfoy's face was exposed, covered in mud, but the scar was clearly visible.

"Oh, my," Dean gasped. Malfoy either didn't notice, or didn't care. For a while, Dean just stood examining it as they continued down the corridor. And then, in a voice of pure admiration, he said, "Harry, Ginny said this was your handiwork. Did you do it?" Harry took a second to figure out what Dean was talking about. He wasn't feeling well, and it was hard trudging Malfoy down the hall. Harry was starting to think Malfoy wasn't walking on purpose.

"Yeah, I did it," he huffed stopping to look at the staircase they needed to climb.

"It's bloody exquisite!" Dean breathed. Suddenly, as if broken from a trance, Malfoy realized they were talking about the scar on his face. He pushed Dean away.

"Get away from me you filthy mudblood!" he croaked. But the second he tossed Dean off, he lost complete support and crumpled down to the floor. He tried crawling on all fours up the stairs. "I..." he gasped, "... can get there... myself." They watched him climb about six steps and then collapse. Harry knew what it was to feel the Dementors drain you of your happiness. Malfoy had laughed at Harry's vulnerability during their third year. He wondered what had changed to make Malfoy so overcome.

"Your father?" breathed Harry.

"Stay away from me!" Malfoy screamed, but the voice was weak and shaky. Harry wondered what it would be like to have first known, then lost his own father, even to prison. Had the Dementors found this new weakness in Malfoy? Harry bent low to one knee.

“Draco let us help. We’ll just take you to the hospital wing and be out of your hair.” Malfoy looked ready to spit in Harry’s face. “You have my word.” Malfoy looked into Harry’s eyes. The blonde’s gray eyes were bright against the dark brown mud caking his face. For a second, he knit his eyebrows, the fire still burning with hatred. Then, the fire left, and an expression Harry had never seen cross Malfoy’s face appeared. Malfoy nodded his head, and fell back on the steps.

Harry reached down and took one arm and Dean took the other. The going was slow, and Harry wondered why Professor Dumbledore told them not to use magic. Dean broke the silence of the journey just before they were at the doors to the hospital wing.

“Malfoy, I know you hate it, but it’s... well fantastic! I’d swear it was Tibetan. And how Potter put it on your face when he draws like a monkey is beyond me.” Malfoy remained silent. They were at the doors and about to go in when Harry held Malfoy against the wall. All three of them were now covered in mud and stained with blood. He held his face close to Malfoy’s.

“I need to know. How many?” he asked. Malfoy’s eyes began to float into space. He began to tremble again.

“Hundreds,” he breathed. His eyes were wide. “They were like flies. I tried to outrun them, but...” He looked down at his hands. They were bleeding and raw. “Someone from the town saved my life,” he whispered as tears began to fill his eyes. “He summoned a patronus, but it was too weak.” The shivering was growing. “I just wanted to die... they were over me... and reached down, and...” He felt the left side of his face. “They dropped me... they... they took him.” Malfoy was now shaking violently. Harry took his own sleeve and wiped the mud from Malfoy’s face the best he could. The ache in his arm was gone.

“I... I’m sorry Draco,” he whispered. “It’s my fault.” His words were heavy, but sincere. He took a deep breath and pulled Malfoy’s arm around his neck. “Get the doors Dean,” he said. And walking through the archway Harry Potter carried for the first time the full weight of Draco Malfoy--body and spirit.

Chapter 22 - Salazar's Pride

At breakfast the next morning, everyone looked exhausted. No one had slept the night before. Harry, Dean, Neville, Ron and even Goyle were huddled around their window looking for some sign of what was going on. It was early in the morning when wizards and witches began to appear on the grounds. The night sky glowed with a hint of the sunrise to come. At one point, Ron and Hermione had been called out by Professor McGonagall, only to return saying no one was to leave their dormitories. There was no more news to give other than all was safe. When the sun finally peeked over the horizon, the students were released to head for breakfast.

In the Great Hall, there was a frenetic thirst for information. In such an environment rumors grow exponentially. One common thread was that somehow Malfoy was linked to the Dementors. "Why else would he be in Hogsmeade," called Parvati, "if he wasn't in on it?" Many echoed her opinions; even the Slytherins were thinking that Malfoy had summoned the Dementors to town.

Then there was the talk about how Harry, having heard of the evil that Malfoy summoned to Hogsmeade, brought the Slytherin down in the entranceway, dueling him while Dumbledore watched. Their only evidence... the witnesses that had seen Harry crouching over Malfoy like a lion ready to devour its prey. Some spoke of how James Chang had tried to stop it, but that he was sent away by the Head Master. Considering that every Slytherin ran in panic the moment they had heard the word Dementors, Harry was not surprised that they didn't have a clue as to what really happened.

Assigned initially to Gryffindor, James sat a few tables down from Harry. He was making a halfhearted attempt at eating. He seemed content to listen to Dennis Creevey tell him all the wonderful things there were to learn about Hogwarts. Seated next to Harry were Hermione and Ron. He had tried to leave when Hermione arrived with Ron at her side, but she grabbed Harry's robes and with surprising force insisted that he sit.

"I'll sit," he said, "but don't think I'm talking. Not with him."

"I don't know what you two are having a row about," Hermione chided, "but I want you to talk about it and get it out in the open right now." Harry raised his eyebrows.

"I told you to ask him for answers, not me," Harry retorted. Then looking across the table he added, "Unless, Ron, you'd like to tell us all what you're upset with me about." Sitting to the other side of Hermione was Neville and Dean.

"Yeah Ron," chimed in Neville, "you've been in a pretty lousy mood ever since you got here. What's up?" Dean flicked Neville on the arm and shot him a glance that told him to be quiet. Harry caught it, but Ron had his hands to his forehead, and did not look well.

"Really, Hermione," Ron said, looking at his uneaten breakfast, "I'm too tired this morning, okay? Maybe tomorrow." When he looked back up to Hermione, his eyes had a look of fright in them. It wasn't there when the two had walked in. Harry looked around the room, then back to Ron. It was as if everyone's emotions were leaving an imprint on Ron's face.

As they were talking, a murmur fluttered through the Great Hall and it suddenly became quiet. Harry looked from Ron to the Head Table. Dumbledore had just entered and stood beside his chair, waiting for complete silence. When it came, he began to speak.

"Last night," he said, his voice clear and strong, "some two hundred Dementors rampaged through the town of Hogsmeade." There was a collective gasp. Many had heard it was Dementors, but the words coming from Dumbledore's mouth made them real and Hogsmeade made them close. "The Ministry, many local inhabitants, and many witches and wizards of the staff here went to repel the attack. By midnight, nearly one hundred Dementors had been captured; the rest fled. There were many injuries, and much damage, but no fatalities. Such is the way of the Dementor. There was one wizard, Mr. Silverton, who lost his soul saving the life of one of our own students."

There was a general murmur. The words "Malfoy" and "Draco" bounced off the walls like ping-pong balls. James Chang began scanning the room, looking for his nemesis. Dumbledore pressed on.

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy. He is recuperating in the hospital wing. He is well and will be returning to class shortly.” There were more whispers. “No,” Dumbledore boomed emphatically, “he did NOT have anything to do with the attack. He was unfortunate to find himself in Hogsmeade at the wrong time.” Dumbledore’s face did not move, but Harry was sure he saw a flash of blue glance his way. “The school is safe, as are the grounds.” The elderly wizard seemed to age for a moment, and then stepped away from the Head Table and down among the students. It was most unusual, but as he surrounded himself with the students, he gathered strength, and years were wiped from his face. His stature straightened and he spoke as if holding the hands of each individual student. Harry noticed the fear begin to fade from Ron’s face.

“We will not let terror rule our lives. We will defeat this evil on every front. We will push back his advances. We will deny his goals at every turn. The day will come when Voldemort is utterly destroyed.” This time his eyes bore straight on Harry. Hermione noticed and held his hand. Dumbledore turned and took in the Great Hall. “By staying true to the principals this school was founded on, by working together for a greater good, you will lead the charge. Yes, each of you will have your hand in his ultimate defeat.” The room fell silent for a moment as Dumbledore began to walk back to the Head Table. There were a few whispers weaving their way through the air like snakes.

Dumbledore returned to his chair, and spoke one last time wearing a broad smile. “We will continue as we have for centuries. The Hogsmeade weekend will not be canceled. We will fight fear with bravery, destroy hate with love.” There was a loud cheer throughout the room. As the room quieted, Dumbledore smiled. “There is one thing more we have done for centuries... study hard, and do our homework.” There was a collective groan. “You have only fifteen minutes before class. Finish your breakfasts!” He clapped his hands, and the sound of forks and plates clanging together returned to fill the room.

Ron turned back to see Hermione holding Harry’s hand. For a moment his face flushed, then it lost all expression as he closed his

eyes. Hermione pulled her hand away, slightly embarrassed, while Harry tried to kick Ron in the leg, but he was too far down the table. It was too late. Ron had read Hermione's mind, and now knew what she had been thinking -- the prophecy of Harry's fate. When Ron opened his eyes they were as big as silver dollars and focused straight at Harry.

"Why... why didn't you tell me?" he gasped. Hermione thought he was upset about her holding Harry's hand. She began to explain how she was just holding Harry's hand because of last night's trauma. But she was telling a lie that Harry knew Ron could see through. Ron now knew of Harry's ultimate confrontation, at least, Hermione's interpretation of it, and she was dead bang on. Harry didn't say a word. He stood up from the table and walked away.

"Harry," she called. But Harry was having nothing to do with Ron... ever. He was nearly out of the Great Hall when the sound of multiple screeches signaled the arrival of the morning post. He waited, but Hedwig was nowhere to be seen. Her absence only plunged his heart lower. He was about to leave when Seamus walked up to him from the Ravenclaw table.

"We've moved the timetable, Harry," he whispered, "for obvious reasons." He glanced over to the Slytherin table. "Late next week. I'll let yeh know." And before Harry had a chance to say a word, Seamus was back laughing at the Ravenclaw table.

"At least he's happy," Harry thought, and he left to make his way to Potions.

He was early. There was only one other student waiting for Professor Snape. In the back of the room, considerably cleaner than the night before, sat Malfoy. His blonde shoulder length hair was pristine and his robes pressed. He was certainly not the tatters and blood of just a few hours ago. For a moment Harry hesitated, then stepped back to leave when Malfoy turned his head to see who had entered.

Harry just stared. Malfoy had removed the bandage completely, the scar was revealed. It was the first chance Harry had time to truly examine the design up close. Save for the two lightning-bolts on the

base of the sword that burned his forearm, the marks were identical. Malfoy just stared back, his lips turned in a slim smile. The mark was less red than the mark that appeared on Harry's arm. But against Malfoy's light skin it was clear to see from a distance.

"Well, Potter," he snapped, "what do you think? Your mudblood friend thinks it's 'exquisite', or am I simply some sort of freak?" He turned back facing the front of the classroom. "Well, either way, I'm not hiding it anymore. We'll see what the school thinks of your handy-work." Harry just looked at the back of Malfoy's head. Could this statue of ice before him be the same sniveling creature he saved from being torched? Harry simply walked toward the front of the class and sat down.

"I hope, Draco," Harry said, facing the front of the classroom himself, "you won't stun me in the back again." He turned to face Malfoy, a sneer slashing across his own face. "It would be a shame if you found yourself waking up in Voldemort's basement this time. But then, maybe you'd prefer..."

"You!" Draco yelled. "I knew it! How Potter? Damn you! You almost cost me my life!" He stood drawing his wand, the chair he was sitting in scraping across the stone floor and reverberating in the empty classroom.

"And YOU!" cried Harry. "You killed everything that made her Cho! Not nearly Draco. She's as good as dead!" And Harry stood, wand in hand.

At the same moment about six students walked through the doors, stopping instantly and gawking at the scene before them. An encore, they thought, to the duel from the night before. Harry pressed on.

"You've been a slug, Draco, and a ferret," he taunted. "What would you like to be this time?" Students were piling up on the outside of the door. It was a commotion that went unheeded by either of the two students inside.

"If it hadn't been for you Potter, Old Man Silverton would be having breakfast with his wife this morning. They took him because..."

Malfoy took a deep breath as a pang of regret welled up inside him. "...because he tried to see me here safely." Malfoy's words were a stiletto slicing deep into Harry's innards. Immediately, the Gryffindor dropped his wand to his side, turned and slumped to his chair. He could hear the crowd outside collectively sigh and make their way into the dungeon classroom.

"Harry, what's going on?" It was Hermione, her hand on his shoulder as she sat down next to him. He was looking down to his hands, rolling over Hagrid's words of manhood in his mind. He looked over to Hermione.

"I killed him," he whispered. There was pain in his green eyes. "I killed her," he whispered again. "I'm death, Hermione. Death."

"Harry you're not..." The dungeon door burst open with a clang. They didn't need to turn to know it was Professor Snape.

"I'm glad you could find your seat today Mr. Potter," he sneered as he came to the front of the class. Then he looked to the back. "Mr. Malfoy please face the front of the class, you can..." his sentence broke for just a beat as Malfoy revealed his face, "...take these notes down." He waved his wand in the air and the class board filled with the morning's lesson. Throughout the lesson, Harry was an automaton. Mechanically, he read the instructions and mixed the ingredients. When the lesson was over, he'd made the best draught he'd ever attempted in Potions, but he didn't care. After he handed his flask to Professor Snape, he turned to speak with Malfoy, but the blonde had already left.

During Care of Magical Creatures he was silent, standing to the back away from Ron, away from everybody. When Hagrid tried to engage him with questions he would respond with a simple yes, no, or just shrug his shoulders. At lunch, Hermione and Ron were talking to Goyle and laughing about something. Harry deliberately sat with Colin so that he wouldn't have to say more than a word or two. Once again he had found his internal compass spinning. How could he possibly save the world when everything he touched turned to death?

When it came time for his Transfiguration lesson, Harry found himself arriving early. For some time he sat alone drawing his own doodles around the edges of his notebook. They weren't pictures of brooms, but of sunsets. Without invitation, Malfoy sat down next to him just before class was to start. He sat on Harry's right ensuring his partner would have a good long look at the mark on Malfoy's face. But Harry didn't need to look; he knew what was there. The two sat silently before the start of class as Professor McGonagall chatted with Hermione in the front.

Harry took his wand out and set it on the table in front of him. Without looking at Malfoy he said, "Draco, I'm sorry." Except for the soft murmurs of students in the class, there was silence. Then Malfoy pulled out his wand and began to twiddle with it in his hands.

"It's just that..." Malfoy started. With a finger he slowly stroked the grain along his wand's shaft, and then he shook his head. He set his wand down next to Harry's and brought his left hand to his face. Before he could say more, Professor McGonagall called the room to begin.

While she had most the class working on the previous lesson, a few students were moving on to more advanced efforts. Hermione along with Anthony Goldstein, and Harry with Malfoy were given a box turtle again, but this time they were asked to change it directly into another animal, a snake. It was the first time in class they'd attempted an animal-to-animal transfiguration. McGonagall showed the new spell and wand movement to both pairs. Harry wondered if it would be more difficult than when he was angry and turned Goyle into a toad.

After the professor left Harry and Malfoy, they grabbed their wands and began, neither wanting to be second best. It was as if the two were dueling. With each flash of the wand their transfigurations became better and better. At one point, Harry had turned the turtle into a rather squat snake with stubby legs.

"Pitiful Potter," Malfoy drawled. He untransfigured the creature back into the turtle and attempted the spell himself. "Quadrena Serpses!" The turtle stretched and lost its legs. The head became snakelike, but the shell remained.

“Not QUAD-re-na, quad-RE-na,” Harry corrected. It goaded Malfoy, but Harry was right, and Malfoy nodded. Toward the end of class, it was Malfoy who succeeded first.

“Looks like a snake to me,” the Slytherin snickered.

“You should know,” Potter griped back. Two more attempts later, Harry succeed in the transfiguration. A glance to the front revealed that Hermione still hadn’t mastered the spell. When he looked back to his desk, the snake was attempting to slither over the edge. Malfoy re-centered it with his wand. Then, an idea flashed across the blonde’s face.

“Can you talk to it?” he whispered.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “It was a turtle, after all.” There was a mischievous glint in Malfoy’s eyes.

“Well, give it a go,” Malfoy coaxed. “Ask it something.” Harry glanced up to find McGonagall correcting Anthony Goldstein’s wand movement. He wasn’t sure why, but the tone in Malfoy’s voice was compelling. He leaned down next to the snake.

“Hassa hayaheth?” he whispered. The snake raised its head and looked at Harry. “Hassa shessa rahess,” Harry continued. The snake clearly looked at Malfoy, flicking its tongue then back at Harry. Malfoy leaned in close, transfixed.

“Well?” he asked Harry. The scene looked very conspiratorial: Harry and Malfoy shoulder-to-shoulder, forehead-to-forehead leaning down over the snake.

“She says,” Harry replied, “you’re better at this than I am.” Malfoy leaned up grinning and punched Harry on the shoulder.

“Hah!” he shot. The smile curved the dagger that plunged down from his eye. Harry forced himself not to look.

"She also says," continued Harry, "the whole thing is making her dizzy, and could she be a turtle again? It feels safer."

"Simple enough," Malfoy smiled and flicked his wand, "Quadrena!" and she was back to being a turtle. He stared at her for a moment, and then looked back at Harry. He squinted his cold gray eyes. "Father says you learned it from him," he whispered looking slightly nervous, "when he gave you that." Malfoy's eyes shot to Harry's scar then dropped meeting Harry's. For a moment, eye-to-eye, the two were frozen in time, then Harry leaned back.

What was this about? Had he forgotten who he was sitting next to? Every word he said, every deed he accomplished would certainly be recorded and reported back to Voldemort as surely as he was speaking to a Death Eater's son.

"I don't know, Draco," Harry said at a distance but squinting his eyes to match Malfoy's. "I've left you with a mark; can you speak with snakes?" For a second Malfoy considered the possibility, but Harry didn't let the thought stay for long.

"Oops! I take that back," Harry smirked. "You talk with them every day... don't you?" He turned and watched Professor McGonagall as she began to clear the desks with her wand. Without looking at Malfoy he said, "I won't be your personal spy back to daddy, Draco."

"Spy?" Malfoy hissed. "I'm not a spy, Potter." For a beat Harry resisted the temptation, but he couldn't resist; he needed to be cruel.

"No?" he spat a bit too loudly; a few students looked their direction. "Then tell me Draco, whose side are you on? Are you with your father, in league with Voldemort or not?" Malfoy looked up to see far too many eyes on him.

"You're insane Potter!" he called out certain that those near would hear. "Simply insane." By now Professor McGonagall was at the back of the class clearing the desks there.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy," she called from a few rows away looking over the top of her spectacles, "I've been watching you this afternoon."

You both performed exceptionally. Ten points to Slytherin." The other Slytherins in the room cheered.

"What?" Harry called out. "You said BOTH of us!" He stood up out of his chair, half leaning on the desk in front of him.

"It was Mr. Malfoy who transfigured the turtle first, Mr. Potter." It was almost as if she were enjoying the words. Harry couldn't believe it. His own Head of House! "Perhaps next time, Mr. Potter," she said. Harry sat back down and shoved his wand back inside his robes. Malfoy slipped his in grinning all the while.

As class broke out into the corridor Harry deliberately stayed behind to ensure he was one of the last to leave, and giving Hermione a long head start. When he finally left the class and entered the corridor he was stunned to see Malfoy leaning against the far wall.

"Here to gloat are you Malfoy?" he said without stopping. "I noticed you didn't answer my question." Malfoy paced at his heel.

"Too many ears, Potter," he whispered. "Something you would have learned if you'd have been in Slytherin." The only students in sight were those well in front and heading to the second floor.

"You know, Potter," said Malfoy, "you should have been in Slytherin." The words, so close to a path that Harry often wondered about, prickled the hair on the back of the Gryffindor's neck.

"Never," he spat through gritted teeth still striding down the corridor.

"How did you do it? How did you get me to Hogsmeade?" questioned Malfoy.

"Playing spy again, Malfoy?" Harry turned to the stairs for the second floor.

"Somehow," Malfoy drawled, "I doubt you were playing by the rules. Were you?" Harry was silent and the smile of Malfoy's face widened. "You never play by the rules, do you, Potter?" And then he hissed at the back of Harry's ear, "Salazar would have been proud."

Harry could feel Malfoy's warm breath, but it sent a cold shiver shooting down Harry's spine. Harry remained silent until they reached Basic Apparation. Malfoy's words, however, kept bouncing off the walls in his mind, and kept resurfacing all through the day. There was a part of Harry, deep inside, that smiled at their retelling.

At dinner that night, Harry found himself sitting with Katie, trying to discuss Quidditch strategies. Once again, he had shunned Ron and Hermione. Sitting, talking Quidditch with Katie, surrounded by dozens of people Harry would have called friends, a sense of loneliness began to come over him.

"Where's your head, Harry," she snapped. "If I wanted to talk to the wall, I would."

"What? Oh, sorry," Harry said. "Can't seem to get my mind clear tonight."

"Well you better get it clear soon. We'll be playing before you know it. I don't know the playbook like Angelina did. I always flew the way I was told, and I'm going to need your help putting something new together this year. If we give the same look again, we'll be destroyed." She dropped her fork into her mashed potatoes splattering gravy on her robes.

"Here," Harry said sliding out his wand, "let me get that." He pointed at the gravy dripping down the front of Katie's dark blue blouse. "Scourgify!" he called. The gravy vanished, but then the blue began to turn white, and suddenly the threads on the front of Katie's skirt began to tatter and disintegrate. Katie quickly held one hand over her front while grabbing her wand with the other. Un-phased, she pointed the wand at her napkin.

"Vestio!" she called, and the napkin transfigured into a gray smock. She held it over her front. "Potter," she said, rolling her eyes, "you're a genius on a broom, but how you ever got in to six N.E.W.T.s is beyond me." She stood up and walked to the entrance of the Great Hall to the sound of claps. Fenton Clint of Hufflepuff let out a whistle and said something derogatory Harry couldn't make out just as she

was at the doors. Katie flashed her wand his way, and a bowl of soup flipped over and landed in his lap. "Potter!" she yelled. "Clint needs some help!" And she turned and left the room. Harry held up his wand as if to offer Clint a hand, and Clint quickly covered up, which brought laughter to everyone watching.

"I told you to be careful." Harry turned to see Hermione. "Your wand's amplifying." Harry held his wand up and looked at it.

"Looks the same to me," he said and slumped down on the bench, his back to the table.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"What did you and Ron talk about at lunch?"

"I'm not going there, Harry," she said emphatically. "If you have a question for Ron, ask Ron yourself. I'm not playing envoy."

"Sorry," he said, and then he grunted a laugh. "Hmm... I've been saying that word a lot today; what a waste." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands to his face. His long black hair hung down hiding his expression. "I can't do this, Hermione." She reached her hand and slipped the hanging hair over his left shoulder. The silver lightning-bolt dangled down. She remained silent. Harry began to wonder if things would be better if he had parents he could talk to.

"Last year," Harry said, staring at the floor, "did you write your parents about Umbridge?"

"Well, sure," Hermione replied, "as best I could. She was reading the post, you know that."

"When you write, what do you write about?" Hermione turned a little on the bench.

"Well," she searched, "all kinds of stuff. I tell them about what's been happening, and what I've been learning."

"Did you tell them about Victor?"

“Victor?” she looked bewildered.

“Yeah, Krum, and the dance.” He sat upright and looked at her. “Did you tell them how you felt, or ask them what they thought about you going to a dance with someone from a foreign school?”

“I guess you could say,” she paused, “I asked for some advice about the dance.” Harry could see she was sidestepping. Why couldn’t she just tell the truth? What was she hiding? He stood up.

“Lies,” he sighed. There was no energy left in him to be angry. “All lies.” He wanted, no, he needed to talk to someone... to get it all straight in his head. For a second, part of him thought he could use Hermione, or maybe her parents. He suddenly felt that it was a stupid thought, and only made his sense of isolation build.

The Great Hall was emptying. At the teacher’s table, locked in conversation, only Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore remained. Stars were breaking out on the ceiling above, a large, red glow shown bright in the center of the sky, almost mocking him.

“Harry,” Hermione said, “I would never...”

“Stop it!” Harry snapped. His words echoed off the walls in the emptying room. He held his hand up, palm outward, and backed toward the wall. “Just... just stay away.” When his back hit stone, he began to slide down coming to rest on the flagstone floor. “Just stay away,” he repeated in a weak whisper.

Hermione was helpless. She looked around. Save for the two Professors, seemingly oblivious, there was no one in the room. Slowly, she made her way to the entrance of the Great Hall. She glanced back one more time to see Harry, in a heap, motionless against the wall, and then she left.

Harry sat on the ground with his head slumped against his folded arms. “Why am I here?” he said to himself out loud. “It isn’t fair. It isn’t right.”

“No. No it isn’t,” a deep voice echoed off the walls. “But you won’t find answers sitting on your bum, Harry.” He looked up to see Dumbledore standing over him. “Get up son.” His blue eyes were kind and he was smiling, but his face still bore a deep sadness. “I’m thinking desert is in order. Would you care to join me?” Dumbledore held out his hand and Harry took it, standing by his side.

They walked toward the chamber behind the teacher’s table off the Great Hall. “I’ve had them fix up something my mother used to make.” For the first time since he’d arrived at Hogwarts, Dumbledore put his arm around Harry’s shoulder. “Far too much chocolate for an old man, but with your help, I think we might just finish it.”

Chapter 23 - Chosen Paths

The anti-chamber seemed somewhat smaller than Harry had remembered. It was cool, and the only light flickered from a dozen candles floating above a small round table to one side of the room. There, were placed two small purple plates and in the center an enormous desert that looked like a mixture of whipped chocolate pudding and fudge cake, topped with cherries.

Dumbledore walked over to the fireplace. "Incendio!" he called and the logs burst into flame. Warmth and light filled the room. "A simple spell, with so much impact," he said whimsically walking toward the small table. "It's one of the first spells Wizard children learn, often camping with their parents in the woods. And yet, even you have not realized its full potential. Please, Harry, have a seat." He held out his hand for Harry to join him at the table. Harry sat down and Dumbledore began to slice into the desert with a large knife. "I find desert tastes better if you use your hands, don't you?" he said with a sparkling smile and a twinkle in his eye. Harry couldn't help but smile back. Dumbledore gave Harry a very large portion, and then he served himself spilling it over his plate. With a finger he wiped the table and licked the chocolate.

"Did Cho ever tell you her brother was a Wizard scout?" Dumbledore asked, stabbing a cherry on his plate. Harry, his mouth full, shook his head. "He's very impressive for his age. Holds more badges than any other youth in Britain. There was never any doubt he'd make it into Gryffindor," Dumbledore winked taking another bite. Suddenly he grimaced.

"Ouch!" He reached to his mouth and pulled out a cherry pit. He held it up like a diamond examining every detail. "Fascinating, don't you think Harry?"

"How so, sir?" Harry asked wiping his mouth with his napkin and wondering what in the Wizarding world would be fascinating about a cherry pit. Dumbledore looked longingly at the pea-sized seed.

"Cherries are, I'm afraid to say, one of my greatest weaknesses. They are, in my opinion, the most perfect fruit on the face of the earth."

Dumbledore's face was filled with rapture. "And yet, every now and then... they bite back." He placed the pit on his plate, and stabbed another cherry holding it out on the tip of his fork. "Tell me Harry, should I stop eating cherries because a few challenge my chewing?"

"Of course not sir," said Harry smiling.

"I agree!" Dumbledore smiled back and popped the cherry in his mouth following it up with a large scoop of chocolate whipping. Harry took another bite from his own plate and then put his fork back down.

"Sir, I..." he stopped unable to find the words. Where would he begin, or should he bother saying anything? It was Dumbledore who spoke again.

"Have you been writing to Gabriella?" he asked. Harry reddened.

"Yes," Harry answered, "I'm waiting for a letter from her now." Dumbledore grinned almost mischievously.

"I hope you don't mind Harry, but the other day I had to take a look. She is quite beautiful."

"You... you've seen her?" Harry shot out. "How is she? Is she okay?" Dumbledore held his hand up.

"Easy, easy," he laughed. "I stopped in to see her the day before classes began. I understand how you might be taken with her." Dumbledore sat upright in his chair then leaned in toward Harry. "I've taken the precaution to place a few protections around her, Harry. Just in case." His face darkened somewhat. "I was busy there the night the train arrived." Harry looked down to his plate, and then up to meet Dumbledore's eyes.

"It's my fault, sir." His voice was raspy. "You wanted me to bring them together, and all I did was start a war among the houses..."

"Really? Dumbledore asked wiping some dripping cream from off his beard. "Last night I thought I saw a Gryffindor save a Slytherin's life, or at least save him from untold weeks in the hospital wing. Was I

mistaken?" He looked at Harry over his half-moon spectacles. "And the way you accomplished that was most interesting." Harry subconsciously began to rub his right forearm.

"And what about Mr. Silvertown?" Harry countered. "If Draco hadn't been in Hogsmeade, if I hadn't..."

"There are untold paths to every action, Harry," Dumbledore cut in. "It is impossible to predict the outcome of every one. Even the greatest seers of our time have been wrong. The difficulty always lies in staying true to our hearts. I believe this," and he tapped his finger to the side of his head, "far too often gets in the way." Dumbledore wiped his mouth, set his napkin on the table and walked over to the fireplace.

"And even when we remain true I'm afraid, the path can twist." He held his hands up warming them against the flames. "You sat with Cho, because you like her. Draco entered your carriage because he hates you. But Draco hates so much," Dumbledore shook his head, "he hates everything he doesn't understand... a poisoned mind. Cho decided to stand against him... another choice. And today... today Ravenclaws conspire to attack Slytherins in secret." Dumbledore turned to find Harry's eyes were wide and his mouth a bit slack. Dumbledore continued.

"And still, last night you chose to reveal one of the gifts you hold secret to save your very enemy. A powerful gift, I must say, I have only seen one other use in my many, many years. And a choice... a choice that promises very interesting consequences." Harry walked to the fire and stood next to Dumbledore.

"Professor," Harry whispered, "am I... am I some kind of freak?"

"You are growing up, Harry," said Dumbledore warmly. "Nothing more, nothing less. You are becoming a man, and a very fine one too if I might add." Again, Dumbledore put his arm around Harry. "As old as I am, I still learn new things. I fear the day when the morning sunrise doesn't promise a new discovery. Why, just last night I discovered a very curious thing happens when a patronus traps a Dementor

against a wall.” Dumbledore’s eyes seemed to flash a small glint of revenge, and his mouth formed a silent “Pop!”

Harry simply stood there, and watched the flames flicker. His mind was racing through time and space trying to gather the courage to ask the one thing he most wanted. But his bravery faltered.

“Sir, can people change?” he asked, “I mean, really change, deep in their hearts?”

“You already know the answer to that Harry,” answered Dumbledore. “And Dudley sleeps under your very roof.”

“The remember-ball,” Harry chuckled, nodding in agreement.

“As for Draco,” Dumbledore shook his head, almost reading Harry’s mind. “If he has any hopes of changing, it is with his father behind bars, with himself at Hogwarts, and...,” he hesitated, “with you as his guide.” He walked over to the table and waved his wand. The plates of desert vanished, and almost instantly the lines on his face grew deeper. “Harry, I tell you this in deepest confidence, do you understand?” Harry nodded. “If Cho does not recover, I’m afraid he’ll have to join his father.” Again he flicked his wand and two chintz chairs appeared. Dumbledore sat with a slight groan.

“You asked what you were doing here, Harry. Do you know the answer?” At these words Harry threw himself back into the other chair and sank deep into the cushion.

“To save humanity?” he quipped.

“No,” Dumbledore said immediately. “You are here to learn. Our founders established this school so that knowledge, and even some wisdom, might be handed down from generation to generation. This is a time to discover and sharpen your skills, to deepen your understanding of Wizardry. Tools you will need in the war to come. But it is also a time to discover who you are, who you will become, and decide what difference you are willing to make in this world.” Harry couldn’t help but think of Soseh’s words on his birthday.

The log popped throwing a red ember out on to the floor. Dumbledore swished his wand and tossed it back to the fire. "The mark on Mr. Malfoy's face," Dumbledore began. "Was it Ms. Granger who gave you the idea for the design?" Harry repositioned himself in the chair.

"No," he said. "I just... I just wanted him to know what it was like to be different, to be stared at all the time." He started to squeeze the cushion of his chair. "If I had known..."

"Yes?"

"If I had known, I'd have thrown him out the window!" Harry spat.

"And it would be you who would face the unhappy prospect of joining Lucius Malfoy at Azkaban," Dumbledore replied. "Instead, Draco is alive, and there is hope. Given the choice, it is always wisest to choose hope. Indeed, I had hoped you'd be Quidditch Captain this year." Harry's ears perked. "But, alas, Professor McGonagall said you were too prone to adventures."

"That's ridiculous!" Harry sang out.

"Exactly what I said!" Dumbledore chimed in. "You're the best flyer hands down in all of Hogwarts I said. Certainly, you have one of the best heads for the game." And without knowing what had happened, Harry plunged into an exchange of Quidditch with Professor Dumbledore that lasted twenty minutes. All thought of Dementors or Death Eaters had evaporated. The pressures of playing the hero disappeared. The conversation ended with Professor Dumbledore telling Harry that next year, he'd have the All-England Team out to see him fly. "A noble profession, Quidditch," he finished.

"That would be excellent, Professor," said Harry, grinning. "We've tryouts this weekend. I think I might want to put a few plays together for Katie, just to put the rookies through their paces."

"Wonderful, but I think you need to finish your homework first, and I've kept you far too long." Dumbledore stood and Harry followed. He waved his wand and the chairs were gone. "I understand that you want to become an Auror," he said. "Something to fall back on should

Quidditch fail.” They laughed together as they walked to the Great Hall.

“Harry, I was a fool last year for not telling you how I felt. This year will be different. My door is always open, do you understand?” Harry nodded smiling, and Dumbledore patted him on the back.

They left the darkened Great Hall and walked out to the front corridor. As Harry took his leave and started for the Gryffindor common room, he turned to Dumbledore.

“Professor!” he called down the corridor. Dumbledore, about to turn the corner, stopped and looked back. “The other... who could do magic without a wand... who was it?” For a moment Dumbledore hesitated turning something in his mind. Then a simple smile graced his face.

“In good time, Harry. In good time,” he said, and disappeared around the corner.

That night, Harry slept in peace, and over the next few days, he studied hard, but thought more about Quidditch than his lessons. Harry ignored the fact that Goyle had somehow replaced him as Ron’s best friend. He paid no attention that Neville was clearly falling in love with Helen Hedera, and she with him. Harry had stumbled on the two kissing in the botanical section of the library. And, he was quite happy when at breakfast he told Seamus and Anthony in no uncertain terms that he was ‘out’. Instead, his mind was, and would stay, focused on flying.

When the day of Quidditch tryouts had arrived, the air was warm and clear, and the grass green as they walked out onto the pitch. Besides the starting four, Harry, Katie, Ron and Ginny, there were over a dozen Gryffindors ready to try their skill--and one Slytherin. There were various types of brooms. Harry noted that Geoffrey Hooper had a new Nimbus 2001, and wasn’t whining too much, at least not at the moment. Jack Sloper was also there looking to make Beater again. His size had definitely improved since last year, and Harry hoped his coordination had as well.

The night before, the four starters had discussed what they were looking for in Chaser and Beater positions. Harry and Ginny had put together the strategies for the various plays they'd have the prospects work through. On the field, however, Katie took command.

After a few moments explaining the drill to everyone, she started with the first group, released the Bludgers, tossed the Quaffle, and let the Snitch free. Harry kicked off from the ground and in an instant found himself high above the stands. The sudden acceleration took him by surprise, but the flight up was as smooth as silk. He gently glided down to the end of the pitch near Ron, and even though he was still mad at him, Harry couldn't help but smile.

"Don't let 'em score on you King!" he called with a grin. Slowly, he leaned on the nose of the Caduceus and he shot like a bullet to the far end of the pitch weaving his way past a Bludger and over the head of Geoffrey Hooper. His eyes were wide, the acceleration exhilarating. He tried a few more moves bringing the broom high and then dropping it into a dive. "The Potter Pounder," he thought, because anybody foolish enough to stay with him would be pounded into the ground. Inches from the turf, he nosed the Caduceus up, his feet brushing the tips on each blade of grass.

"Potter!" Katie yelled. "Your broom is lovely. Now find the Snitch! I want the next group out on the pitch." Harry saluted, beaming, and brought the broom back up high over the field. It was as if he was flying without a broom. It reacted almost to his thoughts. Suddenly there was a glint down low behind Ron's head. Three seconds later the Snitch was in his hand, as Ron nearly fell off his broom in Harry's wake. Katie called the next set to the field.

"So, your hindness," Harry said to Ron, "did they score?" Ron straightened himself.

"Strangely, no." Ron smiled back. "It seems I anticipated their every move." Harry's eyebrows furled, but he remained silent.

The next group included Goyle. Compared to the rest of the Gryffindors he was massive. Harry pulled down close. "Remember,

you're supposed to keep the Bludgers away from me, right?" Goyle just smirked.

Again Harry took the first few minutes to exercise his broom. He tried a few sudden stops and swerves. The Caduceus was incredible! Jack Sloper, trying to keep a Bludger from hitting Harry, misjudged the broom's speed and nearly dismounted Harry as he knocked the Bludger just in front of him. Harry simply smiled and looked to the blue sky. "I wish it were raining." Indeed Harry found his heart light and his mood the best it had been since being at the pool with Gabriella. When the thought of her seeped into his mind he turned his broom toward Little Whinging. He'd been expecting an owl for days, and still Hedwig had not returned.

"Potter!" Katie yelled again. "Look out!" But Harry didn't need to hear her words; some internal instinct had him already responding. He turned just in time to see a Bludger whizzing toward his head. He pulled hard and the Caduceus reacted instantly. If he'd been on his Firebolt, he'd be falling to the ground now. He looked down. The grass was at least two-hundred feet below. What was a Bludger doing this high? He looked to see Goyle below turning his broom away as if nothing had happened. Harry was at his side in an instant.

"Playing tricks are we Goyle?" Harry spat.

"I don't know what you're talking about Potter," Goyle said dismissively. He charged his broom at a Bludger that was headed toward Katie and knocked it across the pitch. For a moment, Harry watched as Katie carried the Quaffle toward Ron. She passed it to Ginny who swooped to her left, slowed and shot it over to Katie at the other ring. It was a tremendous feint and even Harry expected Ginny to try the score. Instead Katie caught the Quaffle and tossed to the ring on the left, but Ron was in position and stopped the score. Katie cursed.

"Bloody hell, Weasley!" she cried out. "That was brilliant." Harry knew why, of course, and something about it was starting to bother him.

The afternoon was waning when the final group had finished. Still, Harry was in no mood to stop. He'd had no problem catching the

Snitch the first time he saw it. Six in a row with no escapes was a personal best. He'd spent much of his time looking at the moves of the candidates. Not one had been able to score on Ron. In fact, Ron was starting to gloat about it. Harry swooped over to him before he lit on solid ground.

"Ron, a word," he said and headed his broom to the other side of the pitch. Ron followed him and they hovered near the stands.

"What's up, Harry?" Ron smirked, running his fingers through his hair. "Not a bad practice, eh? 'Course you'd think someone would score." He looked down at the cluster of candidates below. Katie was saying something in a very animated way.

"Ron, you can't just use your mind to look into people's heads!" Harry snapped.

"Why not?" Ron snapped back.

"You've got to use your eyes and your understanding of the field."

"I'm doing just fine!"

"Sure, today, when the stands are empty!" Harry's voice was loud and started to echo off the other side of the pitch. The group below turned their way. "What happens when this place is filled, and every mind thinks the score's coming from a different direction? What then?"

"What? Are you worried you're going to lose your position as our savior? Don't tell me you're jealous!" Ron retorted.

"Jealous! Are you crazy!" Below, Goyle mounted his broom and was heading their way. "Have you done anything to get this under control?" Ron was silent, his face reddening. "I didn't think so. I won't have you ruin Gryffindor's chances!"

"I'm not ruining anyone's chances!" Ron spat, nosing up close to Harry.

"Everything okay, Ron?" Goyle said coming up to join the pair. Harry shot him a glance of pure fire.

"Goyle, I'll give you three seconds to get back down, or you'll be headed there the hard way!" Harry warned through gritted teeth. Goyle glanced down to the ground and pulled out his wand. Harry raised his right hand.

"Expelliarmus," Harry hissed. The wand flew out of Goyle's hand falling fifty feet below. "Move it Goyle... NOW!" Goyle's eyes were wide. He glanced to the ground, then to Harry. Finally, he turned and sped downward to gather his wand. Harry looked back at Ron.

"What? Now that thug's coming to your aid?" he said, not waiting for a reply. "You two have become pretty chummy in only a couple days. You might as well send an owl straight to Voldemort!" Harry turned, fired his broom downward, and landed by the group of Gryffindors. Ten minutes ago he was as happy as he could be, and now he was ready to spit venom.

Katie was explaining that they'd take a few days to decide who would take what position. She thanked them all for putting their best effort in at a hard tryout.

"Hard?" Harry called out, still steaming with anger. "Who here thinks what they just went through was hard?" A few raised their hands. "Then get out now, because what you'll have to go through to be on this team will be ten times worse! We practice in the cold, and the rain, and the wind. We'll work hours into the night debating tactics and strategy. When game time comes this winter, you'll be lucky to see the sun shine. The crowds will be screaming, and the other team will want to rip your heads off. Some of you saw it up close last year. Kirke knows." As Ron and Goyle landed, Harry pointed to Andrew Kirke who had replaced one of the Weasley twins at Beater. "He had a good long time with Madame Pomfrey after the game with Hufflepuff, didn't you Kirke?" Kirke's face reddened. "The point is, if you're not in this for the long run, if you're not committed to making Quidditch your life, get out now!"

Nearly half began to leave the field. Katie cringed sliding over next to Harry. "Great job, Potter," she whispered, "that's two of the best in the lot gone."

"They're no good to us if they're not going to put in the effort," Ginny said crossing her arms. Harry turned to Goyle.

"What are you still doing here?" he sneered.

"None of your damn business, Potter!" Goyle erupted. "I'm here, and I ain't leavin'." Goyle stood tall, defiant, his eyes fixed on Harry and unblinking. Harry looked at him hard, and realized, for the first time, that this mattered to Goyle. He really cared. Then Harry looked over at Ron, whose eyes bore a look of sincerity. The redhead nodded.

"We don't need a few days, Katie," Harry turned to his teammates. "We can do this right now."

"But..." she started.

"Goyle and Hooper at Beater, Creevey at Chaser," Harry said flatly.

"Dennis?" Katie questioned. "He'll be blown out of the pitch with the first good wind!"

"And Goyle's gone after Christmas," Ginny joined in. "What do we do then?"

"Listen," Harry replied. "Creevey's got his own Firebolt, and as small as he is, he's faster than the two of you. He's also crazy out there. It'll either score us points or get him killed. We've got to have an edge they won't expect. As long as Goyle's in the air keeping him safe," Harry glanced Goyle's way, their eyes meeting, "I think it'll be scores." Dennis was grinning so wide Harry thought he might explode.

"As far as Goyle leaving at Christmas," Ron jumped in, "we can have Kirke and Sloper keep practicing with the team through the fall. When Goyle's out, one of them will be able to take his place."

"Wait a minute!" Kirke interrupted. "I'm not going to practice all fall just to have a fifty-fifty chance that I might play winter term. That's crazy."

"No it's not," Sloper said. "You'll have the chance to play with some of the best players Hogwarts has ever seen. The practice will be great even if you don't play next term." Katie surveyed her prospects.

"Harry," said Katie, "you're right. We need commitment." She took a deep breath, and then called out clear and strong. "Goyle, Hooper, Creevey--First String. Kirke, you're out, Sloper's the only backup we'll need. First practice is next Saturday after lunch." Then she turned to Goyle. "I expect you to work as hard as anyone else, and that includes giving Jack a few pointers on the fine art of being a Beater. I want him pounding Malfoy off his broom this spring."

Goyle actually smiled back nodding his head. As they were walking back to the castle Goyle slapped Jack Sloper on the shoulder. "Jack, you remember when Katie was cutting behind..." and in an instant, Greg Goyle was a full-fledged member of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

Ginny came over to Harry and said, "What was that all about?"

"He's giving Jack a few pointers." Harry shook his head. "We're insane."

"No," she corrected, "you and Ron. What were you two going on about?" she asked. Harry shook his head. He stopped, letting Ron and Katie pass by, and waited until they were well ahead.

"Ron and I have come to a fork in the road, Ginny," Harry said coolly. "I've decided to choose one path, and he's decided to choose another. It happens, that's all." They started walking back to the castle. "It's... well, I don't think we can be friends anymore." The sun was low, and their shadows stretched out before them toward the castle. What warmth the day had was slipping away.

"You can't mean that Harry," Ginny said, taking him by the arm. "There are only three things he ever talks about--Hermione, Quidditch,

and Harry.” Both of them laughed, but Harry’s smile fell as he stopped and took Ginny by the hand.

“Your family’s been wonderful. They’ve kept my soul alive for the last six years. But it’s time for me to move on. Friends grow apart, Ginny. Ron will be talking about someone else before you know it.” Harry immediately thought of Goyle.

“Oh Harry,” Ginny cried, and she put her arms around him, giving him a great hug.

“Hey you two! What’s up?” It was Dean standing at the castle entrance. He had a smile on his face, but his eyes were darting from Ginny to Harry and back again. “Ginny, we were going to meet for dinner, right?”

“Oh, I’m sorry Dean, it’s just that...”

“Yeah, I know... more Quidditch lessons from Harry.” He shot an eye at Harry, and brusquely put his arm around her. “McGonagall’s looking for you, Potter,” he said coldly.

Harry watched Ginny put her arm around Dean, pulling him close as they walked to dinner. He looked back to see the sun begin to dip beneath the horizon. There was no cloud to bring color to the dusk, just a dying yellow... fading to night. He walked to Professor McGonagall’s office. When he entered, he found her at her desk reviewing papers.

“Ah! There you are Mr. Potter,” she forced a weak smile, but lost it immediately. “Have you eaten?”

“Not yet Professor,” Harry replied. “We’ve just set the Gryffindor team. We started with Ginny, Ron, Katie, and me. Today we added Dennis at Chaser,” her eyes widened, “Geoffrey at Beater...”

“Bit of a whiner isn’t he?” she asked.

“A whiner with a new Nimbus 2001,” said Harry with a grin, he paused, “and Greg as Beater.” He sighed.

“Greg?” Professor McGonagall queried in confusion.

“Goyle, ma’am,” said Harry, and then he added quickly, “with Jack as backup for when he leaves next term.” Her eyes peered over the top of her spectacles. She slipped them off and set them on her desk.

“Albus was right,” she said to herself, straightening her robes as she stood. “I wouldn’t have thought it possible.”

“Right about what, Professor?”

“There’s no time for that now, Harry.” She walked over to her shelf and pulled down a small box. Harry knew instantly what it was.

“What’s happened?” His heartbeat quickened. “Where am I going?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Mr. Chang has sent word,” she began then stopped, trying to find the words. Harry’s heart crumpled. “Things are not well for Cho, I’m afraid. He would like you to... to come say goodbye... before the end.” Harry was white as she opened the box revealing the small golden portkey. Harry stepped back.

“No. I...” He stepped backward into a chair. “I can’t... she can’t... she can’t die!” A torrent of emotions spewed up from within. He kicked the chair at his side, sending it across the room. He threw the papers on a nearby desk at Professor McGonagall. “She can’t die!” He began to tremble, and bent over the desk with his hands to his face. Professor McGonagall set the box down on her desk, walked over to Harry, and put her arms around him, and let him sob on her shoulder. Finally, she pulled back and held his face in her hand.

“She needs you, Mr. Potter. The healers say she’s gone, but for one thread. She won’t let go until she can see that you are okay.” She wiped his face with her hands and straightened his hair. With a quake in her voice she said, “It’s time to be brave, Harry.”

He walked over to her desk, and stared at the small box.

“St Mungo’s?” he asked, looking into her wet eyes.

Professor McGonagall nodded. Slowly, he reached down to the golden sphere, took a deep breath, and snatched it like a Snitch.

Chapter 24 - A Dark Mark

The first thing Harry noticed was the smell. Memories of his stay at St. Mungo's during the summer came flooding back, and he began to rub his arm. Looking around, he found himself near the inquiries desk at the hospital. Behind it stood the great picture of Dilys Derwent. There was a great look of sorrow on her face as she looked down at Harry. The witch behind the desk was talking to a woman that had a snake going in one ear and out the other.

"Spell Damage--Fourth floor," she directed. Harry approached the desk apprehensively.

"Erm, Cho Chang," he breathed unable to quite get the words out.

"Excuse me, dear?" she asked.

"Cho... Chang," he said somewhat stronger.

"And you are?" she asked again looking down at her registry.

"Harry... Harry Potter." The receptionist's eyes shot straight forward, caught his, and drifted upward. Harry simply sighed, and she let out a slight gasp.

"I heard you were with us earlier this year," she said intently staring at his scar. It was always a bit unnerving to have conversations with people who talked to your forehead. Harry turned away and looked at the people around him. To Harry's left there was a disturbance. A group of healers were racing a woman down the corridor yelling at people to get out of the way. The corridor was crowded, and they were having trouble getting people to move. Finally, at the far end, they pushed through two double doors that swung open. For the briefest instant, a tall, slender girl with black hair that had been chasing behind turned and Harry's heart skipped.

"Oh, yes," the receptionist said pulling Harry's attention away, "they're expecting you. Just head down the hall to your right, and then take a left." He glanced back down the corridor, but all was quiet again. "You look tired dear," she said kindly. Harry rubbed his eyes and nodded.

As he turned to leave the receptionist said, "I'm sorry for your loss, dear."

When he reached the corridor outside Cho's room, he found James sitting with an elderly woman. She had wisps of gray hair against the black, and wore glasses. With her wand in hand, she watched two knitting needles weave their way back and forth in front of her with gold and crimson thread. James was reading a magazine, *Outdoor Wizard*, when he saw Harry. At first he looked back down as if he hadn't seen him. Then he started to shake, closed the magazine, and put his hands to his face. The needles stopped and the woman put her hand around him, and looking up she noticed Harry.

"It's okay Jimmy," she whispered. "It's okay." James shuddered, and then took a long deep breath. He stood and walked over to Harry. His eyes were red and filled with tears.

"They said you'd come tonight," he choked. Harry couldn't tell what the expression was on James' face. They stood, looking at each other, as a woman in a white gown with blank eyes floated past locomoted by a healer. "Go away," he whispered, tears starting to fall down his cheeks. "Go away!" Harry was speechless. He had no idea what to say, or what to do. The elderly woman came behind James and put her arms around him. "Make him leave Gran!" he yelled. "Not tonight, please! Not tonight!" And he broke down again in deep heaving sobs.

The door to Cho's room opened; it was her father. His mood was dark, and his face tired and gaunt. Behind him was a tall witch dressed in green, a healer. James let go of his grandmother and repeated his plea to his father. Mr. Cho simply held his son close, as the healer stepped over to Harry.

"Hello Mr. Potter, I'm Healer Altus," she said with a quiet voice, holding out her hand. Harry shook it. "Can we walk for a moment?" And she started to stroll down the long corridor with Harry at her side. "It is, I'm afraid, a very sad case. I doubt you'd remember, but I was your healer over the summer. Your injuries were very similar. Frankly, I'm amazed you survived. And I'm amazed Ms. Cho has lasted this long." Her voice was grim. She stopped walking and stood at a

banister surrounding an atrium. There were small bushes and flowers around a bubbling waterfall. A small child had snuck through and was splashing at the water's edge.

"Harry," she continued. "There is nothing left of her brain. She's lost the will to eat and is losing her ability to breathe. It's hard to say what kind of pain she might be in. The one thing we know is that she wants to see you." She reached out and held his shoulder. "We believe she's holding on until she knows you're safe. With supplements and a bronchial-breathing spell we could keep her in this state for months, but not forever. Her parents have decided to let her go."

"Can't you..." Harry started.

"No," Altus interrupted. "We've done everything. I understand your apprehension, Harry. I'm sorry to say, her brother sees you as the Grim Reaper, here to take his sister away. Nothing could be further than the truth. You need to know that. She's trapped, Harry, and she needs you to release her." They began to walk back to the room. When they returned, James was again sitting next to his grandmother. This time he was held in her arms. Mr. Chang was standing by the door.

"Harry," Healer Altus warned in a whisper, "you should realize she's not the same girl you knew before. Just prepare yourself for that." She opened the door and Harry followed her into the room. Mr. Chang was a step behind. The room was fairly large. Flowers were everywhere, some suspended in midair. And a few balloons with GET WELL emblazoned on them floated in the corner. There was a woman behind a curtain standing at Cho's bedside holding her hand.

"Sun-Yung," Mr. Chang whispered. "He's here." Mrs. Chang stroked Cho's hand and gently kissed it, and laid it back on the bed. She walked over to Harry her shoulders slumped. When she met his face she smiled, a tear falling from the corner of her eye.

"I see now why she wrote so much about you last year." She held her hand to his face. "You are sad, no?" Her eyes were tender and her smile sincere. "We are all sad, Harry. We ask you here to answer her call one last time. It is a great request, and you honor us by

answering our daughter.” Harry began to tremble. She took him by the shoulder and walked him to Cho’s bedside.

“Cho,” she said, her voice raised, “you have a visitor. Harry... Harry Potter has come to see you.” Cho was motionless. Mrs. Chang looked back up to his face. “Take your time, my son. We will be right outside the door.” Her voice wavered. “If there is... a change, you will call?” Unable to speak, Harry nodded, his eyes wet. As the door shut behind him, he took in the scene more fully.

Cho’s face was sunken and sallow. Purple veins streaked down her arms, clearly visible through her translucent skin. Her brown eyes were open, almost fearful, but fixed at the ceiling. She thrust her tongue forward as if trying to speak, but fell silent, drool oozing from the side of her mouth. Harry grabbed a towel at her bedside table. His hand was shaking as he wiped her mouth. He sat at the side of her bed and began to stroke her black hair. It felt thin and lifeless. He looked at the flowers around the bed and then he noticed, there were no portraits of wizards or witches in this room. “Death is private,” he thought.

“Hello, Cho,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “We’ve missed you at school.” Her eyes twitched, but nothing more. He slid closer to look into her eyes bringing one knee onto the bed. “Gryffindor’s picked its team. They’ve flipped the usual schedule; this year we play Ravenclaw first. I... I don’t know what they’re going to do without you at Seeker.” He stroked her cheek. “I don’t know what any of us are going to do without you.” Her head moved slightly to the side, and her eyes seemed to focus on his face.

“Hi,” he said softly, trying to smile. The fear in her eyes faded.

“Harry?” she breathed faintly. “Have you seen Harry? Is he okay?” Her breaths became labored, almost rhythmic.

“I’m here, Cho,” he said, tears falling from his eyes. “Right here in front of you. I’m safe.” Slowly, she moved her hand, and he took it in his own. It was cold. “Harry is safe, Cho.” A small smile creased her thin face.

“Safe?” she breathed, the rhythm was heavier and slowing. Her eyes looked through Harry to another place. “Safe,” she whispered in satisfaction. Harry climbed fully onto the bed and held her face in his hands. His eyes so full of tears he couldn’t see.

“Don’t go, Cho,” he cried. “Stay with me. Just for awhile, please.” But her breaths continued to grow more labored, and the rhythm continued to slow. Harry leaned down and kissed her cheek. He looked down into her eyes. His heart ached and he held her tight. “Please, just a little longer,” he whispered. As he pulled back, through his tears he thought he saw a green light grow in her eyes, but then her breathing stopped and all was dark. “No! Please no!” he cried out loud, and he reached down once again and held her close. Cheek to cheek, he began to sob as he rocked her in his arms. The door opened behind him. He could hear Mrs. Chang break down and cry. A hand patted Harry on the back.

“It’s okay Harry, she’s gone now,” said Mr. Chang, but Harry wouldn’t let go. He was feeling weak, and dizzy, but he held her tight still sobbing. In his arms was his first love, lifeless, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was responsible. And then, inexplicably, a burst of warmth hit his ear... a breath. He froze. Another.

He pulled himself up wiping the tears from his eyes, and looked down. Her eyes were closed, but some hint of color had returned to her face. There she lay, thin and gaunt, but she was breathing. He began to shake, holding his hand to her face. It was warm. Harry heard Mrs. Chang let out a gasp. She grabbed her daughter’s hand and felt her forehead. And then she turned to Harry.

“What happened?” she asked. Harry shook his head, still shaking.

“I... I don’t know,” he stammered as he slid his feet off the bed and onto the floor. The room seemed to spin, and his legs were weak. “She was... she...”

Mrs. Chang stroked her daughter’s face. “She hasn’t closed her eyes since she arrived.” Harry suddenly realized that the whole family was in the room. Healer Altus stepped closer to look. “What does it mean, Healer?” Mrs. Chang asked.

Healer Altus held her wand over Cho's head. It emitted a faint orange light. When the light went off, Altus' hand began to tremble ever so slightly. She looked to Mrs. Chang. "She... she's sleeping," the healer said with bewilderment.

"I don't understand, Healer," Mr. Chang said, stepping forward. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she replied looking at Cho and then to Harry. "The trauma is gone." But these words did not register with either of Cho's parents.

It was James who stood at the back of the room with his grandmother and whispered, "Harry."

Mrs. Chang looked down at her daughter. "I don't understand either. Is she..." But her words were cut short by her daughter's own.

"M-Mom?" Cho said in a very faint and weak voice. There was a collective gasp in the room. Everyone suddenly gathered around her bed, everyone but Harry, who took a step backward. A moment passed, and slowly Cho opened her eyes. "Mom?" her voice was stronger, but still weak. "Where am I?" There was a jubilant explosion as everyone tried to speak at once. Harry backed unsteadily toward the door, walked out into the corridor and sat down. He suddenly felt ill, trembling and cold, and he didn't know why.

How long he sat, he wasn't sure. He found himself staring at the cover of *Outdoor Wizard*, which bore the picture of a Unicorn, its head tossing up and down. He opened the magazine and tried to read an article on camping Muggle style in the high country with only a wand and a portkey. His vision seemed blurred, and he was just trying to read how Muggles pitch tents when the door to Cho's room opened and Healer Altus stepped out. Harry dropped the magazine and straightened in his chair. The healer was shaking her head, but wore a broad smile.

"She's talking," said Altus, "and hungry." She came over and sat down next to Harry. "What happened in there, child?" Harry looked at the closed door.

"I... I said I was fine," he said, and then looking at his shoes, "I told her she could go," he lied. "I thought, I thought she had."

"Well, the brain is the most mysterious thing of all," Altus replied. "Whatever you said, it has brought her back from the brink. She still has some nerve damage, but she's alive and as soon as we get some weight on her she should be ready to go home." Altus stood and ruffled Harry's hair. "You've worked magic today, Mr. Potter," she said grinning and walked down the corridor. No sooner had she left than Mrs. Chang came half way out of the door.

"Healer Altus says she needs to rest, but Cho wants to see you before you go."

"I... I don't think..."

"Come. Come," she insisted, waving Harry to the door. When he entered Cho's room, James immediately wrapped his arms around Harry.

"Thank you, Harry," he said. "I'll never forget what you've done today." Harry looked down at the young wizard and smiled. He walked over to Cho's bed as the rest of the family left the room. Slowly, he seemed to be regaining his bearings. Cho had her head higher up on the pillow and was sipping from a cup in her left hand through a straw. She grimaced.

"Yuk," she puckered, "this is awful." She slowly handed Harry the cup as he continued to smile.

"Wait till you try the green gravy. I hear it puts hair on your chest," he laughed putting the cup down and stepping closer. It was as if he were looking at a different person. She bore a bright smile and warm eyes. He took her right hand, but noticed it did not take his in return; its life had not yet returned. "I thought we had lost you, Cho. We all did." She looked down.

"I was lost Harry." She pulled a flower from one of the vases by her bed and breathed in its aroma. "It was as if I was floating around

these flowers watching myself wither away.” She looked back up to him. “And then you entered the room, and a flash of spring seemed to warm my heart again. You called me back, Harry. Thank you.” He stroked a wisp of hair from off her face.

“You brought yourself back, Cho.” He offered her another sip, but she declined. “Will they let you come back to school?” Cho nodded.

“I think so.” He squeezed Cho’s right hand, but it still lay limp. “Soon, I hope. James tells me Gryffindor plays Ravenclaw in the first match this year. I can’t wait to...” Her mouth opened wide as she let out a long yawn. Harry bent low and kissed her forehead.

“Sleep,” he said. “Everything else will come soon enough.” He took the flower from her hand and pulled her covers up to her chin. “Goodnight,” he whispered and left the room.

Together, Harry and James took a portkey back to Hogwarts. They found themselves at the front entrance to the castle. It was well past curfew, and Professor McGonagall stood waiting to greet them. James immediately ran into her arms, hugging her tight and Professor McGonagall held him close starting to sob.

“What are you doing here, James,” she cried. “You should be with your family.” But when James pulled away he held her hands wide in his. He wasn’t crying, he was laughing, spinning her around in a half dance. Professor McGonagall was at a loss. She looked to Harry who wore a broad grin.

“I didn’t know you could dance so well, Professor!” he called. Professor McGonagall was flummoxed.

“What happened, Mr. Potter?” she called, on one particularly wild spin. But it was James who answered.

“She’s alive! She’s alive!” he sang. “Harry brought her back! She’s alive and well Professor!” He stopped a bit winded, and Professor McGonagall tried to regain her composure.

“Harry?” she whispered.

"He's just happy Professor," Harry said walking close to her. "Cho has regained consciousness." He laughed, watching James dance up and down the steps. "They say she might return to school soon, right James?"

"Yep!" he called out hopping down three steps at a time, and then racing back up. Professor McGonagall looked to the front door of the castle apprehensively.

"Oh dear," she muttered with a look of concern across her face that then gave way to a smile. "Oh dear!" She grabbed James by the back of the collar as he whizzed by. "Come on, the two of you, it is time to head in." They walked to the front doors and she stopped just short. "Gentlemen, the people inside believe that Cho has died, please be sensitive to that fact."

They walked through the front doors into a crowded entranceway. Assembled from each house were the Prefects, the Head Boy and Head Girl. Professors Flitwick, Snape and Sprout flanked Professor Dumbledore who was sitting on a chair next to the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. At the side of the room next to a fine grain leather trunk, stood Draco Malfoy; behind the blonde was his mother, Narcissa Malfoy. The room was grim and silent. Marietta, a Ravenclaw Prefect this year, was staring blankly at the floor. Hermione and Pansy Parkinson were both crying, but for different reasons.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Fudge spoke up. "Well," he said, "It's time, Narcissa, I'm sorry."

"No!" she screamed, her shrill voice piercing the silence of the sullen scene. "You can't Cornelius! I've told you, it was an accident!" If it was possible, Malfoy's face was even more pale than usual, but his eyes showed no fear. Instead, his expression was one of resignation. When he caught Harry's eyes from across the room, there was no malice, and perhaps, Harry thought, a sense of regret. Professor McGonagall strode across the entranceway to where Professor Dumbledore was seated and began to whisper in his ear. James, however, could stand it no longer. He was trying to stay composed

when a giggle and then a guffaw of laughter exploded from his belly. He ran straight to Marietta, jumped up, wrapped his arms around her, and the two fell over onto the ground.

"She's back!" he yelled. "Marietta, she's back!" Most everyone in the room bore the same look Professor McGonagall had moments earlier. Marietta, on the ground with James on top of her grinning from ear-to-ear, grabbed him by the shoulders. She began to understand.

"All the way?" she asked. James nodded wildly. Marietta gripped him close, smiling. Professor Dumbledore stood from his chair.

"It appears, Cornelius," he said, "that Ms. Chang has recovered. Your services are no longer required, unless, of course, you would care to join us for the celebration." And with that, Dumbledore waved his wand and conjured a long table covered with sweets near the front doors that reminded Harry of his birthday celebration. "Perhaps a slice of cake?" he asked with a smile. Dumbledore walked over to Mrs. Malfoy who, at his words, locked her son in an embrace. She was weeping violently, but her tears were tears of joy.

Most everyone had surrounded James and Marietta exchanging hugs and smiles trying to get details from James. Hermione was the first to walk to Harry whose mind was fusing the scene of his birthday party with the vision now before him. "We were told she was to die tonight," she sniffed, wiping her reddened face. "Professor Flitwick said that they would let her pass after she said goodbye to you." She reached out and took Harry's hand. "What happened?"

Harry scanned the room. People were starting to get food from the table, exchanging Cho stories with smiling faces, hypothesizing when she might return. Harry's glance returned to Hermione. "I went to say goodbye," he said, and his hands began to tremble. "But, I couldn't. I asked her to come back to me, and... and she did." He looked at her as if, perhaps, he'd done something wrong.

"Oh, Harry," she cried, and held him close. Harry saw Ron looking at them, but when their eyes met, Ron turned away toward the table of food. Still, Harry let go of Hermione.

“Let’s get a bite,” he suggested. “I missed dinner.” He was following her to the line that had formed when he noticed Malfoy standing at the back of the entryway. He was making his way toward James, tapped him on the shoulder and motioned for him to walk away from the others. Alone, the two started talking. After some time, Malfoy took James by the shoulder and held out his right hand. James hesitated, but then took the offer. As the two shook hands, James said something to Malfoy and the two simultaneously looked at Harry. James continued talking as Malfoy’s and Harry’s eyes locked together. Harry decided he would not look away first. Finally, Malfoy nodded and let go of James’ hand just as Pansy came up to him grinning and giving him a hug.

Harry was exhausted by the time he started up the stairs to Gryffindor. Ron had left an hour earlier, and Hermione not much after that. Harry was caught retelling the story of Cho’s recovery over and over. Everyone found it fascinating, even Mrs. Malfoy who thanked Harry for saving her son, as if that were Harry’s only motivation. She never mentioned that Harry had horribly scarred her son’s face. Evidently keeping him out of Azkaban was of prime importance.

Only Dumbledore seemed unsatisfied with the telling of Harry’s story, as if some critical aspect of her return had been overlooked. Passing through the portrait of the Fat Lady, Harry found the common room empty. The fire was dying down and the room dark. The portraits on the walls were silent as the witches and wizards slept in their frames. He looked at the stairs to the boys’ dormitories, but then decided to sit in front of the fire.

He had not told anybody about Cho’s lifeless arm. “She’ll recover,” he said to himself. He looked at the smooth skin of his own right arm in the glow of the embers. What had happened tonight? He tried to replay the scene in his mind, but he was too tired. He needed to get to bed. At least tomorrow he could sleep in. The fire cracked, and Harry thought he heard a rustling sound. He leaned his head back against the cushion; his lids were heavy. Maybe he’d just rest here a moment and then head up to bed.

The fire was bright and warming. Maybe a bit too warm, Harry thought. It seemed to be growing brighter and brighter. It started to

crackle loudly and Harry pulled his feet in as embers the size of golf balls began to fly out toward him. There was a rhythmic swoosh-swoosh-swoosh as he realized he was sitting in the middle of a grassy field, a group of gnomes was running away from him. He pulled his knees in close. The sound was closer, swoosh-swoosh-swoosh. Suddenly black and red embers began to rain down on his head. He held his hand high but it was no use. The embers began to burn through his robes. He screamed in pain. A gnome was running straight at him and jumped on his chest. "Harry Potter!" it yelled.

"Harry Potter, wake-up, wake-up!" Harry threw the voice off his chest and jumped up brushing the embers off his robes... but there were no embers. He was in the common room. On the floor, next to the fire now almost extinguished, was Dobby the house elf rubbing his head.

Harry looked around trying to place himself. The pain in his arm had returned. He blinked at the fire. "Dobby?" he whispered, rubbing his eyes and face. "What are you doing?" His words were sharper than they should have been, but Harry was agitated and the sight of a house elf didn't help.

"Dobby is cleaning sir," the house elf said rising to his feet and bending in a low bow. "But then Dobby hears the great Harry Potter screaming, so Dobby wakes him." Dobby looked sincerely concerned, but then Dobby always looked concerned. Harry's arm was throbbing, he was tired, and he'd just had a very unpleasant dream. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Great, Dobby," Harry snipped, "I'm off to bed." Harry headed toward the stairs.

"You have a mark upon you sir," Dobby whispered. Harry stopped. His sleeve was down. Had Dobby seen it while he was sleeping? He turned to find Dobby facing him, but bowing low.

"What have you seen, Dobby?" Harry stepped toward him.

"Nothing, Harry Potter, sir, nothing." The words irritated Harry. If he hadn't seen his arm, then how would he know?

“Liar!” Harry yelled. “You’re ALL liars!” He was angry, and he had no right to be. His face was hot, his eyes on fire. “WHAT HAVE YOU SEEN?” He was towering over Dobby. The house elf was frightened; Harry had misunderstood.

“You have a mark upon you sir,” he repeated. “A new mark. Someone has...” Harry bent low putting one knee to the ground, his face inches from Dobby’s. For some reason he had an overwhelming urge to throttle the house elf, but resisted the temptation.

“You’ll tell no one,” he sneered through gritted teeth. “Do you understand? NO ONE!” They were nearly nose-to-nose. Glowing red by the fire, Harry could see the reflection of his face off the large orbs of Dobby’s eyes. It was contorted and cruel.

“But sir,” Dobby whispered with a questioning voice, “surely no one has seen it?” He reached his hand to Harry’s face but did not touch. “It is everywhere, and nowhere,” he said, moving his hand as if stroking an invisible cloud around Harry’s face. “No wizard could see it.”

“SEE WHAT?” yelled Harry grabbing Dobby’s hand before him. The sleeve on his robe slipped down his right arm revealing the mark by the glow of the fire’s dying embers. Dobby saw it immediately and gasped. Clearly this mark was a revelation. Harry let go, pulling his sleeve down and standing away.

“Harry Potter, sir,” Dobby said walking toward Harry as if to help. “Harry Potter has been touched by a Dark Wizard.” There was a commotion from the stairs leading to the boys’ dormitory.

A voice said, “Lumos!” and a bright light filled the stairway. Whoever cast the spell was walking down. Harry turned to the house elf, thirsty for an explanation.

“Dobby, what do you...” but Dobby was gone. When Harry looked back to the stairs, he saw Goyle groggily stepping down in green pajamas. At first he hadn’t noticed Harry was there, he didn’t see the Harry that was now shaking with rage.

“Ron, you better be right,” he said to himself walking toward one of the cupboards above the common room counter. He opened it to find a piece of cake from the evening’s celebration. A grin flashed across his face. Taking the plate he began to head back upstairs when he noticed Harry holding his wand.

“Potter,” he spat, “what are you doing here? So help me, if you...”

In bed, Harry once again cleared his mind before finally falling to sleep. On this night, the last thing to leave his thoughts was the result of his last spell... an image of a jar holding a large toad in green pajamas with frosting all over its face.

Chapter 25 - Out of Bravery, Fire

The red eye stared back at Harry burning with anger, threatening and ominous. "When will we meet again Voldemort?" Harry whispered in the cool darkness. The glowing crimson orb made no reply. "You may find me a bit more mature this year, Dark Lord. But what surprises will you have for me? I know you've made your move already; I can feel it. But, what is it I wonder? Dementors? Bombs? I think not. You want me... I've heard you calling Tom... but you can't have me. You'll never have me."

Blinking, Harry pulled away from his telescope. For weeks they'd been studying clusters and galaxies, and on every clear night when they observed the stars he couldn't help but gaze at Mars as it continued to brighten in the night sky.

"Fifteen minutes, students," Professor Sinistra called out. Another astronomy class was over, and again Dean hadn't been willing to talk to Harry. He was perfectly polite, but behind the façade were cold waters. Harry knew it was about Ginny, but every time Harry tried to bring the subject up, Dean would change the direction or stop it in its tracks. When Professor Sinistra finally dismissed the class, Harry tried again.

"Hey Dean," he said with an earnest voice, "do you think you can give me a hand with these charts tonight? I'll never get this globular cluster drawn right." Dean continued to slide his perfect renditions of the same images into his case.

"Gee Harry," he replied not looking up, "I'm kinda busy tonight. Hermione and I were going to work on Arithmancy together. Sorry." Dean pulled his pack over one shoulder and started down the stairs. Frustrated, Harry shook his head and walked over to the parapet. The night sky was brilliant as the quarter moon gently lit the grounds below. He put both hands on the banister and sighed.

Every day the people he could count as friends seemed to be growing smaller. Ron and Dean were speaking more to each other than to Harry. And if Ron was found laughing in the common room with anybody it was with Hermione or Goyle. Seamus blamed Harry

for Ravenclaw's utter defeat in their 'secret' attack against Slytherin. Somebody had been tipped off, and the Slytherins never went into the classroom to duel. Instead they waited for the Ravenclaw's to leave and ambushed them in the corridor. Seamus' face was still popping green puss that smelled of boiled cabbage. Even Anthony Goldstein had turned his back on Harry. Anthony was angry, not because he'd been beaten by Slytherin, but because Harry, not Anthony, had saved Cho's life. As for Dean, he seemed more distant with each passing day, while Neville was spending most of his time with Helen Hedera. Neville hooking up with Helen, however, met Harry's approval. He noticed that the coupling definitely improved Neville's confidence in all of his classes.

What bothered Harry the most was that Hedwig had still not returned. At first he was worried, but then his thoughts turned to an irrational fear that Gabriella had decided to let their paths part. After all, he'd told Hedwig to stay with her; maybe she had. Lately, his mind had turned that fear into anger and resentment, deepening his sense of isolation. Only Hermione made any effort to be friendly to Harry, but after Ron had seen her holding his hand, even she became more cautious of seeming too close.

The one loyal friend he thought he'd never lose, Dobby, had disappeared completely. Every minute Harry could spare was spent searching for the house elf. He slept in the common room, visited the kitchens, and left notes that disappeared, but were never answered. With the cool night's breeze blowing gently at his face, Harry stood on the parapet in the dark and his ears echoed Dobby's words -- touched by a Dark Wizard. But no Dark Wizard had touched him, unless Voldemort had left something behind last year... something hidden.

Below Harry, the front doors to the castle opened and Firenze jumped out onto the front lawn. He walked near the Whomping Willow, but the tree remained still. For a long time as Harry gazed at the centaur, the centaur gazed at the sky, his hoof nervously clawing at the ground. Something was clearly troubling Firenze, but when Harry looked up at the stars he couldn't tell what it was. "Could centaurs see Dark Marks?" Harry wondered. Just as the thought crossed Harry's mind, Firenze noticed him on the parapet. The centaur

nodded his head in a subtle bow, and Harry waved in return. Then Firenze walked toward Hagrid's cabin and disappeared behind.

Harry looked out across the lake toward Hogsmeade. The town's lights gave a faint glow to the horizon. His mind turned to Malfoy and the soul that had been lost because of Harry's own foolishness. At least he and Malfoy had stopped dueling, directly anyway. Simple insults towards one another had become their language of choice. Much like their magic in transfiguration, their verbal sparring had become a competition of sorts. But there had been no sincere threats since Harry had returned from St. Mungo's.

For some minutes, Harry stood silently trying to put all the pieces together, but the puzzle was getting too large, too complex. By the time Harry made it back to the common room, he had again found himself with far too much homework, far too little time, and no friends to help him accomplish it. Ron, Ginny, Dean and Hermione were working together by the fire. Goyle was talking to Katie and Sloper about Quidditch. He thought about joining them, but then shrugged his shoulders and headed to the boys' dormitories.

His room was empty. Harry thought about the very real possibility that Neville might be breaking curfew if he didn't get back in soon. He grinned to himself. Looking around to make sure he was alone, he walked over to his trunk and pulled out a birthday gift, Soseh's painting. For quite some time he just looked at her, wishing he could stroke her black hair and dive into her black eyes. His fingers traced her head and back, but did not touch the delicate painting. "Where are you, Gabriella?" he whispered. His words were sorrowful, but then, suddenly, his mind began to bend his sorrow into anger. "You've found someone else, haven't you?"

He examined the portrait's dying day, the orange sun plunging into the azure ocean. If anything the colours were more brilliant. Looking closely at her face, he sensed somehow sadness in her expression. How could he not have noticed before? He began to peer more closely at her eyes when he heard footsteps climbing the stairs. As he slid the portrait back, he noticed Dudley's gift and held it in his hand. The thought of clunking the head of whoever was coming up

the stairs crossed his mind. When he saw that it was Ron and Goyle, the urge was palpable.

"I'm beat, mate," Ron said to Goyle, not noticing Harry crouching low between his trunk and bed. "Did you three come up with any new strategies?"

"Well," Goyle began, "we're trying to make sure we don't rely on the Seeker winning the game every time, right? Gryffindor's got to be able to win the match outright even if Ravenclaw gets the Snitch." Ron nodded his head in agreement, as he changed into his pajamas. "That means more aggressive play and faster ball handling. How Potter convinced Katie that that shrimp Creevey could play... I don't know... she won't budge."

"Potter pretty much gets his way around here, mate," Ron replied crawling into bed. "Get used to it."

"Well, you'd a thought he'd get detention for... well, you know." Goyle began to shudder rubbing his face. "As if I could really surprise the great Harry Potter! Merlin's Beard! I was just trying to get a slice of cake! I didn't even see it coming, I tell you."

"You don't get it do you," Ron sighed putting his hands behind his head on his pillow. "That transfiguration was well past N.E.W.T. level. There are maybe two guys in Ravenclaw, and maybe Hermione who could cast that spell right in all Hogwarts. If I tried, you'd be some sort of blob on the floor, pretty much like you were on the train last year." Ron began to laugh.

"That's not funny!" Goyle yelled, and then he brought his voice down low leaning down to Ron at his bedside. "A snake is what he is."

"Potter's not..." but Ron's words were cut short. Harry could take it no longer. He stood up and grabbed his pillow.

"This snake..." he stuck out his tongue and hissed at Goyle who was so frightened he fell over backwards knocking over a lit candlestick into his own book pack and starting a small fire, "...will be sleeping in the common room tonight." Then he turned to Ron. "So I'm a Potter

now; is that right, Weasley?" The look on Ron's face told Harry he wanted to take the words back, but pride mixed with guilt stood in the way.

"I'll call you whatever I want to call you, Potter," he snapped back. "Enjoy the couch!" Somehow the words hurt. Harry didn't want them to, but they did. He wanted to say something, something spectacularly virulent, but his face withered and his shoulders slumped. Still holding his red, round, rock in one hand, and his pillow in the other he slouched down the stairs.

Behind him he could hear Goyle blurt out in a loud whisper, "That's tellin' him!" But there was no reply from Ron. On the way down he passed Dean and Neville.

"Hi, Harry," said Neville with a warm smile. Dean said nothing. "Going to try and catch a glimpse of Dobby again, eh?"

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I guess," he said grimly.

There was a first year student sitting in the couch by the fire reading a book. Harry didn't know his name... Patrick something. Not wanting to be rude, he went and got a glass of water and sat at the table rolling the red ball around from hand to hand, left to right to left... "One lone student," he thought, "and he's got to sit there." The ball was heavy, very heavy, right to left... "I should have just cracked him!" he murmured under his breath. "Potter pretty much gets his way around here," he mocked now throwing the rock from hand to hand, left, right, left... "As IF!" he spat loudly, standing and beginning to pace the room, right, left, right... "If I'm a snake, he's poison," he said to himself. "Haseth Hayaheth!" he hissed. "There! How's that for snake?" He was trying to think of what he should have said. What was the perfect retort to Potter? There were so many, too many really. He squeezed, pressing the red rock with the fingers of his right hand. Ron made an easy mark, and Harry knew anything he'd say would cut to the bone. His fingers loosened. He couldn't do that to Ron; he wouldn't do that to Ron.

The anger began to ebb away, and Harry took a deep breath. The stone ball seemed somehow lighter in his hands. He looked down

and admired the intricate red and black patterns on its surface. He walked over to the first year to ask if he could use the couch.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but do you mind if I..." He looked at the first year to see a shaking white wisp of a thing staring back at him. The child's eyes were wide with fear as his eyes darted from Harry to the table. Harry looked back to see that his glass of water was steaming. What water he had was now nearly all boiled away. "Oh, that...uh yeah. It's probably one of the ghosts playing tricks again. Maybe you'd best be off to bed, eh?"

Trembling, the first year closed his book and headed toward the staircase facing Harry all the while. Harry walked over, grabbed his pillow and tossed it onto the couch. "See ya!" He waved as the first year finally passed up the stairs and out of sight. He flopped himself onto the couch and tried to clear his mind. At first, it was impossible. Angry, self-pitying thoughts kept flashing into his head. As he rolled the ball around in his hand, he began to relax, and finally his thoughts began to drift away. Before long he was asleep.

There was a thud and Harry woke abruptly reaching for his wand. He was still by the fire in the common room. A glance out the window confirmed it was still night. The fire seemed to have more logs on it than he remembered. He sat up for a moment rubbing his face, looked around, and seeing nothing lay back down to sleep. Suddenly, he realized that his stone was no longer in his hands. He looked to the floor--nothing. He was still a bit groggy as he swiveled off the couch and crouched low to see where it might have rolled. Finally, he saw that it was in the fire nestled among the glowing embers. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the brightness.

"Damn," he cursed, looking for some way to get it out. "Your wand stupid," he said to himself. Half asleep, and without really thinking he called out, "Accio stone!" Instantly the stone flew toward him, and instinctively he reached for it like a Snitch. Before the ball hit his palm, his mind realized he'd made a mistake, but it was too late. The fiery stone struck his flesh.

He gave out a small shriek and dropped the stone to the floor. But, something was wrong. His half-sleeping mind was trying to fit the

pieces together. He'd felt no pain. He looked at the palm of his left hand, and there was no blister. He bent low and knelt next to the stone on the floor. He held his hand over its surface. He felt no heat. With one finger he touched the red surface. It wasn't hot; it wasn't even warm. If anything, it was cool. He held it in his hand, perplexed.

With his wand, he levitated it into the hottest part of the fire and set it there. He went over and refilled his glass of water taking a drink and waiting. After a few minutes he levitated the stone out of the fire and slowly let it sink into the glass of water. Instantly the water sizzled as it struck the stone's surface. Steam poured out. Again, Harry repeated the experiment; only this time, without fear, he dropped the ball into his own left hand, fully expecting to hear the same sizzling sound. But none came. The stone felt cool. He shook his head. What was going on?

"Very brave!" a voice rang out breaking the stillness and silence. Harry dropped the stone on the floor again and spun on the sound, wand in hand. "Very brave, indeed Harry Potter, sir!" It was Dobby. There was a smile on Dobby's face, but the house elf looked ill. He was thinner, if that were possible, and his colour looked... well, off.

"Dobby!" Harry called. Seeing the house elf in front of him looking back with the first smile that had faced him in over ten days, Harry reached down and hugged Dobby. Then, with one knee on the floor, he held his shoulders looking at him closely. "Are you okay? You're ill!"

"Not ill, Harry Potter, sir... not ill." Dobby smiled, a bit overwhelmed by Harry's hug. "Dobby has been busy, very busy." Harry picked Dobby up in his arms and carried him to the couch by the fire. His eyes were clearly exhausted, and his clothes, which of late had been so new, were tattered. There was the slightest tremble as he held Dobby in his arms, as if the house elf was cold.

"Sit here Dobby, rest," he said laying the house elf on his pillow and covering him with a quilt.

"You are a great wizard, sir," Dobby said trying to sit up, "Dobby must stand." But Harry held him down.

"You'll stay there Dobby," Harry insisted. And the house elf, truly unable to push back, gave in and put his head against the pillow. "Why have you been busy Dobby?" Harry asked. Dobby lifted his head slightly off the pillow.

"Is it safe, Harry Potter, sir?" he whispered. Harry looked around the room and nodded. Exhausted, Dobby put his head back down. "Dobby has been traveling sir, looking. But Dobby has failed. Dobby has failed Harry Potter!" Dobby began to bang his head with his hands, and Harry grabbed each with his own.

"Stop it Dobby!" said Harry. "You haven't failed me. I... I've failed you. I had no reason to be so cruel to you. I'm sorry, Dobby, truly sorry." He held Dobby's thin hands in his own. "Can you forgive me?" Dobby's eyes began to fill with tears and he reached down and blew his nose in his tattered shirt.

"Dobby tells them," the house elf began, "Dobby tells them all, and each year the stories of Harry Potter grow greater. Dobby has friends, sir, many friends. They won't admit it sir, but Dobby tells them of your greatness, sir. And now it is not just Dobby telling the stories. Your name is known, sir." He took Harry by the right arm. "And so Dobby searched sir. Dobby traveled to all his friends. And Dobby's friends asked more friends." The house elf's voice grew quiet. "There are many house elves Harry Potter. And many friends work in dark places," he whispered lower. "Dobby asked who could leave such a mark on the great Harry Potter. But Dobby failed sir. There is no Dark Wizard in all of Britain that could do such a thing, at least not one known to us."

"Dobby," Harry said quietly, "what Dark Mark? Please, tell me. What can you see?" Harry rolled up his sleeve to show the smooth skin on his right forearm. "Is it this? Is it the mark you saw here?" To Harry's surprise, Dobby shook his head, no.

"It is a charm, sir," Dobby spoke as his eyes cleared. "House elves can see it, but wizards can't. Dobby can see it all around you." Again, Dobby held his hand to Harry's face but did not touch, stroking an

invisible layer Harry could not see. "It is Dark magic, Harry Potter, sir." Dobby shuddered as he pulled his hand away.

"A charm?" Harry asked. "A charm, or a hex? Do I have a curse set upon me Dobby?"

"Dobby can not see its purpose sir," Dobby said shaking his head, "only its nature. It is old magic, very old. It is a charm, I think, not meant for a wizard." Dobby tried with all his might to pull his head off his pillow, but he couldn't. He began to speak again, but Harry stopped him.

"Shhh," Harry breathed with his finger to his lips. "Later Dobby. You need to eat and rest. Let me carry you downstairs." Dobby's eyes began to fill with tears again.

"He cares more for Dobby than... than to know..." Dobby sniffed and blew his nose in his shirt again. "Truly, Dobby's greatest friend! There may be other places, yes? Other elves Dobby has not spoken to?" Dobby's eyes began to focus elsewhere. "I will return, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby must discover the cause; I must not fail!"

"Dobby, no!" Harry yelled. "You've got to rest... to eat." But Dobby raised his hands, smiled and disappeared before Harry's eyes. Harry flopped back onto the pillow that Dobby had just left. He pulled his right sleeve up and looked at his arm.

"What mark is it Dobby?" he spoke to the fire. He had so many questions, but Dobby looked ill, very ill. And now he was gone, not to rest, but to search for more answers. Harry noticed the red orb at the front of the fire again, and levitated it toward his hand. Again it was cool in his palm.

"Where did you get this, Dudley?" he breathed, looking at its bright orange crevices, and its crimson depths of smoke. Harry thought of Mad-Eye's words. It could be cursed, or some sort of orb to track Harry's whereabouts. Perhaps it was listening to every conversation he had. Harry sighed. What other kids had to worry about their gifts being bewitched. "It's just a rock," he told himself, and holding it with

both hands on his chest, he relaxed and watched the flames reflect off its surface. Finally, his mind drifted off to sleep.

He woke, his eyes still closed, to the touch of someone stroking his hair. "It's long, isn't it?" Ginny whispered.

"Yeah," Hermione replied softly. "I don't know. I think I liked it shorter."

"Oh, no. I think it gives him a more edgy look. He'll need that." There was concern in Ginny's voice. "When, do you think?" she asked wrapping a finger around a half curl of Harry's black hair.

"I don't know, Ginny. I don't know. But we'll all have to be ready when it happens." He could hear Hermione walk around the couch. "Harry," she whispered rocking his shoulder. "Harry, it's time to wake up." Harry opened his eyes, blinking.

"Hello, sleepy head," said Ginny, grinning over the back of the couch. "You'd best get ready." The morning bustle of students preparing for class was filling the common room.

"Yes, Harry," said Hermione grabbing him by the shirt. "Get up, or you'll miss Potions."

"Wouldn't that be awful," Harry mumbled, rubbing his eyes as he sat up. The tremendous number of short people filling the room made him think, for some reason, of Gringotts. "Tell me we weren't that small," he said. Hermione just smiled. From behind, Ginny was still fiddling with his hair.

"Hey, Ginny!" Dean called, a hint of irritation in his voice. "Are we going to breakfast or what?" Ginny quickly let go.

"Yes, Dean," she replied in a kind voice. "Just trying to wake Harry up."

"Harry's a big boy now," said Dean, adding a bit of acidity to the irritation. "He certainly doesn't need my girl to get him out of bed."

“YOUR GIRL?” Ginny shot back adding a level of indignation. “Your girl can get whomever she wants out of bed!” Ginny yelled, her voice filling the common room, which suddenly fell silent as everyone stopped and stared. Dean glanced around, embarrassed.

“Fine!” he yelled, stomping off.

“Oh dear,” Ginny said biting her lower lip. “I didn’t mean it like that. Excuse me guys, I... I better apologize.” She left calling Dean’s name down the corridor. Harry stood and looked at Hermione. A grin broke across his face.

“Happy Birthday,” he said giving her a hug.

“You remembered,” she said with a smile and a blush, as she tried patting his hair down in what was sure to be a fruitless battle.

“Of course I remembered. Will there be a party?” Hermione’s ears turned scarlet.

“I don’t think so,” she answered, pulling her hand away. She started looking around, avoiding Harry’s eyes. Harry’s heart drooped a little.

“Well,” he said gently, “I have a gift for you anyway. I’ll get it to you today sometime.” He looked as everyone headed out the portrait of the Fat Lady. “I better get going.” He stroked her face with his hand and darted up the stairs to prepare for the day. When he got to his dormitory, everyone else was already dressed. He met Ron’s eyes for an instant, but they each turned and looked the other way unwilling to say a word. Harry rolled the red stone in his fingers thinking of last night. If Ron hadn’t come when he did, Harry would have slept in bed and, perhaps, Dobby would have gone to eat and rest.

Harry sat on his bed tossing the stone in the air and catching it with the other hand. It was certainly not any bigger than a Snitch, just a bit heavier maybe.

“What’s...” Goyle began but the look Harry shot him instantly told him to be quiet. It wasn’t long before Neville, Ron and Goyle were set to head downstairs. Before they left, Harry spoke up.

"Hey, Goyle," Harry called. "You're friends with Malfoy, right?" Everyone stood still. Goyle, one foot on the stairs to the lower level, was a bit confused by the timing of the question

"Yeah," he replied, "I guess, why?"

"You and Crabbe, right?"

"What's your point, Potter?" asked Goyle impatiently.

"You... you're friends with a Weasley now. What does your friend Malfoy think of that?"

"I can be friends with who I want," Goyle charged.

"Can you?" Harry pushed. "I know Malfoy's seen you being chummy with Ron. He knows you're playing Quidditch for Gryffindor. In class, I'm forced to speak with his disfigured face almost every day. But, he hasn't said one word, Goyle, not one word about his good friend palling it up with, next to me, his least favorite wizard in the world. Why is that do you think?"

"Yeah! Why is that?" Neville repeated. Goyle glowered over the top of Longbottom, and Neville simply started down the stairs.

"The way I figure it," Harry continued, ignoring Goyle and looking straight at Ron. "He either wants you to be Weasley's pal, or he doesn't care. You, Crabbe, and Malfoy... six years at Hogwarts, spending nearly every waking minute together... and he doesn't care. Unlikely, don't you think?" The question was aimed fully at Ron. "But why, I wonder, would he want you to be Weasley's friend?"

"Come on Greg," said Ron. "Let's go." And the two left without another word.

By the time Harry had showered and dressed, it was clear he wasn't going to have time for breakfast. He was sitting on his bed, lacing his trainers, when the red stone he'd left there rolled over next to his thigh. He picked it up and set it down on the table next to his

dragonhead. The table, or the castle floor, being not quite level, the ball began to roll off the edge. Harry grabbed it and searched to put it somewhere. He looked down at the small Snitch-like ball of crimson in his hands, then up to the black dragonhead before him. Its eyes... its eyes were... red. Slowly, side-by-side, Harry compared the stones of the dragon's eyes and the stone in his hand. They were, by all accounts, identical.

The mouth of the Horntail was open, waiting for something to bite. A blood red moon? Gently, Harry set the stone into the razor sharp teeth of the Hungarian Horntail. The fit was perfect. He waited, but nothing happened. "Well? What were you expecting, Potter," he said to himself, "fireworks?" Staring at his two birthday gifts, he couldn't help but think they looked right together. Finally, shaking his head, he grabbed his book pack and headed off to class, leaving his future behind.

Chapter 26 - A Girl's Best Friend

When Harry went to dinner, he had no trouble finding a seat at the Gryffindor table. Most all the sixth years were gone. Ginny and a few others were also absent. A scan around the Great Hall for a few of Hermione's friends from the other houses revealed they were also gone. He knew, of course, what they were doing, having a grand time at Hermione's birthday party. He just didn't know where. He sat down and a plate of chicken, green beans, and roasted potatoes appeared. He was taking a sip of milk, thinking of Dobby, when Dennis Creevey sat down next to him.

"Hey Harry!" his voice cracked. "Where is everyone?" A plate appeared in front of Dennis and he began to eat.

"Hermione turns seventeen today." Harry sighed. "The party's tonight." Adjusting his glasses, Harry stabbed a potato with his fork and thrust it into his mouth. Dennis scanned the table up and down, looked at Harry, but didn't say a word. Instead, he simply took another bite. Harry couldn't help but think of the difference between Dennis and his brother Colin. There was a wisdom behind Dennis' eyes that Colin just didn't have. Knowing when not to speak was a great gift. Happy to be able to guide the conversation, Harry spoke first.

"You were tremendous out on the pitch the other day," Harry said hoisting what energy he could into his voice. "You flew right at that Bludger almost daring it to hit you."

"When you're as small as I am," Dennis shrugged, "you can change directions faster than a Bludger. Colin showed me that over the summer."

"Colin?" Harry was surprised.

"Yeah. He took some moving pictures of me practicing and was able to show me some things I was doing wrong." Dennis smiled. "He's great with a camera. If you'd like, I can have him get some shots of you." He took a drink of milk. "But with that Caduceus of yours, they'd probably all be blurry." Dennis smiled.

“Sure,” Harry found himself saying. “That’d be great.”

They spoke mostly about Quidditch for quite awhile. But they also touched on the summer activities of the Creevey family. Dennis’ father, being a milkman, didn’t make much money. There were no trips to Germany in the Creevey household. Instead, Colin and his brother did yard work around their neighborhood and Colin did some work as a photographer at Muggle weddings.

“I know it’s not much,” Dennis said shyly, “but we get along okay.”

“Are you kidding?” Harry smiled. “It’s brilliant! I worked in a sporting-goods shop this year. It means something, Dennis, when the money in your pocket is earned from your own effort.” Dennis grinned back nodding his head in agreement.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. We made enough to buy the Firebolt.”

“We?” Harry asked.

“Colin gave me his summer savings so I’d have a chance to make the team,” Dennis replied. It hit Harry right between the eyes. Of course, his father could never afford a Firebolt as a milkman, and one summer’s work mowing lawns wouldn’t do it either.

“Everything?” Harry asked.

“Well, he bought some dress robes with the rest, but, yeah, everything.” Dennis spoke as if it were the most natural thing in the world for someone to give all they had for their brother. Harry thought back to Remus’ words: It’s never about how much, but how you use it that makes the difference. Harry looked at Dennis a bit embarrassed.

“It was the Firebolt,” Harry said, “that got you on the team.”

“I figured as much,” Dennis answered un-phased. “There were a lot of good players at the tryouts.”

“But that doesn’t take away from the fact that you’ve flown brilliantly,” Harry added. Dennis looked up with a look that needed reassurance and Harry gave it without a second’s thought. “Brilliantly,” he emphasized. “You’re picking up Katie’s plays faster than anyone else on the team and that includes me.”

By the time the two had finished, Harry found himself feeling much better than when he first sat down. Talk of Quidditch strategies and general Muggle life seemed to lighten his heart. They were headed out of the Great Hall when Dennis began to look uncomfortable.

“What is it Dennis?” Harry asked.

“Well,” Dennis wavered. “You know... Professor Tonks is great and all, but... well, there are some of us who had a good time last year when... well, when you were teaching us... you know?” Harry didn’t know what to say. It was an odd turn in the conversation. “I know it was because Umbridge was so awful, but it was fun. Like our own club or something, it was great!” Again Dennis became uneasy. “Well, a few of us were wondering if maybe you could, you know, start it up again this year.” Harry began to shake his head.

“Look,” Harry said politely, “Dennis, I really don’t have the...”

“I know. I know.” Dennis cut in not wanting to put Harry in an uncomfortable position. “You’re busy. I understand. It was just a...”

“No,” Harry interrupted. “No, I’m not busy.” He paused watching students pass down the corridor. Probably heading to the library, he thought. If anything, he was wasting his time thinking. He needed, he wanted to do something. Still, he was a bit apprehensive. “There’s the dueling club you know.”

“I said fun, Harry,” Dennis said rolling his eyes. “Snape runs that club like a boot-camp, except for his own Slytherins who he lets cheat every time they get a chance.” The two stopped at the bottom of the staircase.

“Listen, Dennis. If I’m running Dumbledore’s Army again, we won’t exclude anybody willing to fight Voldemort. That includes Slytherins.”

Harry waited for a howling complaint, but Dennis took his words, rolled them in his mind, and then nodded in agreement. Then a huge smile burst across his face.

“Same place you think?” Dennis asked.

“Well we won’t have to hide this year. I think we can use the room to...” Harry stopped. “Of course,” he whispered, his eyes casting a glance upward. “Do you still have your coin?” he said excitedly.

“Sure.” Dennis replied. Harry started running up the staircase.

“Keep it handy,” Harry called back. “I’ll let you know when!” He was jumping the steps three at a time. When he passed through the portrait of the Fat Lady, he found the common room empty of all sixth years except two. There by the fire, Neville and Helen were holding hands.

“Neville!” Harry called out. “She can’t be in here! Does she know the password?”

“If Goyle can know the password, Helen can,” Neville replied with a somewhat dreamlike voice. “I just wanted to show her around Harry, that’s all.” Harry didn’t have time to argue. He shot up to his dormitory and grabbed a small package with a bow. On the way down the stairs he passed Neville and Helen climbing up.

“Neville, just...,” Harry sighed, “...just be careful,” he said, and jumped the rest of the way down the stairs. In minutes, he was at the Room of Requirement, Hermione’s present in hand and sweat beading on his brow. The corridor was silent as he wiped his face. When he pushed the door open he was met with a blast of voices mixed with music. His guess was right. It was Hermione’s party.

“You made it!” called Lavender who was standing next to Parvati. Each had a plastic cup in their hand, and both seemed to be a bit too giggly. Grinning, they both spoke in unison, “They said you were sick.”

"They did, did they?" sneered Harry. "Well, I'm feeling much better now, I assure you." He stepped deeper into the room. Virtually every Gryffindor sixth year was here. There were party favors and crackers everywhere. Balloons filled the ceiling and confetti littered the floor. What was left of a rather large cake sat on a table beside a barrel that Harry figured to be a keg of beer. There against the wall stood Dean and Ginny, oblivious to everything around them, arm-in-arm, and all smiles. The room was filled, and as each person caught eye of Harry, they seemed to stop their conversation or laughter. He heard a small cheer coming from a side room. As he walked toward its entrance, Ginny caught sight of Harry and a look of surprise spread over her face. He poked his head into the side room, and found it also filled with people. Hermione was sitting on a couch next to Ron. There was a large flash of light. Colin was taking pictures of Hermione opening her presents. By the looks of things, Hermione had received mostly books, and loved every one.

He stepped in and the laughter stopped. Hermione looked up to see what was wrong, and saw Harry walking toward her. He hoisted a grand smile on his face. He was used to silent stares. He set his small present with what appeared to be yet more books on the table before her.

"I told you I had a present for you. Happy Birthday," he said continuing to smile wide. "It's a wonderful party. Really wonderful." Looking down he noticed that Ron was wearing a T-shirt with the logo of a German beer company that matched the emblem on the keg in the outer room. "A present from vacation?" Harry asked. Ron reddened, but remained silent. Harry looked straight into Ron's eyes. They were bloodshot, drooping, and reminded him of Duncan's after a night of drinking. "Yes, well... I didn't think you'd have the guts to answer." Ron simply scowled.

Hermione took the gift in her hands and removed the paper. It was a small velvet case about eight inches long. When she opened it she gave a small shriek. "Oh Harry! You shouldn't have!" She stood up and hugged him tight. Then reaching into the box she pulled out a golden necklace studded with diamonds. There was a collective squeal from most of the girls in the room. Parvati, who'd been peaking in, ran over to Hermione.

"Here!" she said, smiling excitedly. "Let me help you put it on!" She stood behind Hermione, held the chain in her hand, her mouth aghast, and clasped the sparkling jewelry around her neck. "It's gorgeous," Lavender whispered in Hermione's ear.

"I thought," said Harry, still managing a smile, "sixteen deserved something more than books." Hermione reached out and held him in her arms.

"Thank you, Harry," she said, and kissed his cheek. Harry looked around the room and suddenly became uncomfortable. For the first time, Harry realized that Hermione was starting to look more like a woman than a girl.

"I really must be going, Hermione," he excused himself. "Thanks for everything, but I have a busy day tomorrow." Still smiling he turned and started to weave his way through the people that had poked their heads in to see what he was saying. He had just entered the main room when Ron called him from behind.

"You know you weren't invited Potter!" he slurred. Harry stopped without looking back. He had not intended to give the gift to Hermione in front of Ron, but somehow knowing it hurt Ron made him feel better. He took a step to the door, there was a small gasp, and the people around Harry pulled away. Harry continued to walk toward the door, and Ron continued to yell at his back. "You shouldn't have come! Why do you have to ruin everythin' you touch, Potter?" said Ron, trying to inflict what pain he could. Harry refused to look at him, and continued to the door.

"Ron, please... stop," Hermione's voice pleaded. "Put it down."

The ache began at the tips of Harry's fingers and wrapped its way around his forearm and struck like a knife into his right shoulder. He tucked at his shirtsleeve ensuring it was down all the way. The smile on his face washed away. The placid nothingness he felt walking in was now growing into full-fledged anger. Dean had backed into a corner, but Ginny looked livid.

“Ron Weasley!” she yelled, “Put your wand down this instant or you’ll have more to worry about than Harry Potter blasting you into smithereens!”

“You don’t think I can beat him!” Ron’s voice pitched higher. “So smug, so perfect. Well he’s not perfect I tell you!” Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to step once more to the door. “You know that mark on Malfoy’s face?” Ron called to the crowd. “It’s not the...” Another collective gasp in the room cut him short. Harry had spun, his wand out, and fire in his eyes.

“Weasley!” he shouted with a voice that commanded the room. “Please demonstrate to the rest of our friends why one shouldn’t drink and cast spells. You’re blathering like a raving lunatic!” Everyone chuckled which, for Ron, made matters worse.

Ron’s face reddened more, if that were possible, and he called out, “Reduc...” But his spell was too slow.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Instantly, Ron froze and fell to the floor. Behind him stood Hermione, a span of diamonds across her neck glittering in the bright candlelight, and a wand in her hand. She had cast the spell at Ron’s back that dropped him like a statue to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she said looking at Harry.

“He’s right about one thing, Hermione,” Harry said putting his wand away. “I shouldn’t have come.” He left the room rubbing his arm. He’d only gone a few steps down the corridor when Hermione’s voice called him back.

“Harry, wait!” she said running up to him. “He didn’t mean it. He hasn’t been himself lately.” Her eyes wandered to the party room and then back to Harry. They were mixed with concern and sadness. “I know there’s something wrong, but he won’t...” Harry’s eyes looked to the floor. In that instant, he’d given himself away.

"You know," she whispered. "You know what's wrong with him, don't you?" Harry weakly shook his head.

"No. I can't say that I..."

"Don't feed me that trash," she said, her face flushing. "Now who's spewing the lies?" Harry continued to shake his head.

"I gave my word, Hermione. I know the two of us are finished, but I gave my word. I can't."

"Even if it kills him?" she yelled grabbing Harry by the arm. He winced, and she let go. "It's back?" she asked. Harry nodded. He lifted his sleeve to show her. Her hand covered her mouth, but she said nothing. He lowered his sleeve, and for a moment they remained silent.

"Hermione, you need to get him to see Madame Pomfrey," he whispered looking up and down the corridor. "His scars are getting worse."

"Just a bit redder," she said shaking her head. "I saw... well, I know the welts don't seem to hurt as much."

"Not on the outside, Hermione... on the inside." He paused and took a breath. "The scars run deep," he said, looking at her over his glasses. Hermione's color drained.

"How deep?" she asked, her eyes growing wide. Harry wouldn't say. He knew he didn't need to. "The headaches," she whispered to herself. "Voices... he said voices..." her mind was running to an inexorable conclusion. "The brain!" she grabbed Harry's arm again, and again he winced. "Oh Harry, why didn't you tell me? Why didn't he tell me?"

"He's better when he's not around people," Harry said. "He needs quiet, and solitude."

“And he was surrounded tonight,” she said exasperated. “No wonder he was so... so...” Her eyes shot back to the party room. “I’ve got to get him out of there.” She darted back toward the door.

“Hermione,” Harry said, “let Ginny do it. Stay and enjoy your party. She and Dean can get him back to Gryffindor.” Hermione tried to smile, but made no reply as she started for the door. “Hermione,” Harry called again. “I’m sorry. No more secrets, okay?” Her eyes would not hold his gaze; she nodded looking away and disappeared into the Room of Requirement. Harry returned to the common room wondering why it had been so hard for the three of them to be honest with each other. He was determined to make things different.

But after a week of effort on Harry’s part, the friction between him and Ron wasn’t getting better. If anything, it was growing worse. Despite Hermione’s best efforts, Ron refused to visit Madame Pomfrey. He was becoming more irritable toward everyone. Everyone, that is, except Goyle with whom he was spending more and more time. The one positive note was that Harry didn’t share every class with him. It was hard to believe that less than a month ago they were both bemoaning the same fact. This morning, however, was Charms with Professor Flitwick. Ron sat, as always, with Hermione toward the front of the class. Harry sat next to Malfoy.

It was hard to explain. He and Malfoy clearly were not friends. Outside of class their words to each other were always taunts or insults. And yet, they had most of their classes together, and in those they nearly always partnered. It had become an unfriendly competition. Knowing Cho was becoming better, Harry’s pure hatred of Malfoy had diminished somewhat. And what animosity Malfoy felt toward Harry he couldn’t say. The scar still hung from the corner of Malfoy’s left eye. It was perhaps, fainter, but clearly visible, and a day didn’t go by that someone new would see his face for the first time and gasp. Harry wondered if Malfoy truly felt what it meant to be different for a change. Yet, whenever Malfoy showed Harry any kindness, Harry couldn’t help but think Malfoy was trying to maneuver him into saying something about the Order to feed back to his Death Eater connections.

"Today, class," Professor Flitwick squeaked, "we will be learning an extraordinary charm. He set a small statue of an eagle on the desk in front of him. Pointing his wand at the bird, he said "Invisitata!" The statue disappeared and the class gave out a small ooh and clapped.

"That's no different than Scourgify," Ron chided from the front row next to Hermione.

"I'm afraid it's quite different Mr. Weasley," Professor Flitwick corrected kindly. "Scourgify removes waste matter from its current location, decomposes and translates it to the world around us. That spell would never remove such a large object. Invisitata does not remove objects; it hides them. The eagle is still here." And with that he placed a small white linen over the eagle, its shape clearly visible. Again the class murmured.

"The spell," Professor Flitwick continued, "is good for hiding inanimate objects. The better you are at it, the larger the object can be. Properly done, and with the appropriate modifications, you can make an entire automobile disappear." He winked at Ron. "It is more difficult, however, if the object is moving." He took off the linen and appeared to be slowly lifting the statue in his hand. Then he began to quickly shake it back and forth. The eagle began to snap in and out of visibility with every jerk of his hand. The faster his hands moved the clearer it became. Tired out, Professor Flitwick put the bird back down on the table, held out his wand, and said "Cresco!" The eagle reappeared, stationary on the table before him.

"How sophomoric!" Malfoy drawled into Harry's ear. "One day they may actually teach us something useful in this school." Harry ignored him as Malfoy leaned back in his chair.

"I must warn you not to use the spell on animate objects," Professor Flitwick cautioned, "particularly living creatures." He brought out an owl in a cage. Harry was suddenly reminded of Gabriella. He had not yet heard from her, nor had Hedwig returned. His eyes narrowed and he suddenly found himself sulking. Along with Malfoy, he sunk back in his chair. He had missed Professor Flitwick's words, but didn't much care. Malfoy was right, what would he ever use this spell for?

Professor Flitwick pointed his wand to the bird and called “Invsitata!” The bird’s wings began to fade, as did its flesh. The arteries, and veins as well as the heart and lungs wove a fabric around the bird and were clearly visible. “The bird’s blood moves with each pump of the heart and so we see it and the organs through which it passes as clearly as if we peeled the animal open to take a look inside.”

“Professor,” Hermione called raising her hand, “can the spell be used by healers to see into the body?”

“Very good, Ms. Granger!” said Professor Flitwick as he clapped his hands. “Five points for Gryffindor! That’s exactly how they use it. Tumors, clots, narrowed arteries, all become apparent without harming the patient.” Then Professor Flitwick smiled. “A few wizards and witches have used it to hide their treasure, only to have forgotten where they last left it lay. You can’t bring the object back without a clear shot with your wand.” He scanned the room for a minute and cast his wand. Eagle statues appeared at each table. “We’ll discuss that one later,” he chuckled. “In the meantime break into pairs and help each other master the spell you’ve just learned.”

“Pathetic,” Malfoy said with a sigh, pulling his wand from his sleeve.

“Well, then, have a go!” Harry challenged. Malfoy rolled his eyes and stared at the eagle.

Malfoy raised his wand at the bird and called “Invsitata!” The statue seemed to shimmer for a moment or two, and then simply reappeared as it was. Harry laughed.

“That’s the definition of pathetic Malfoy!” he jabbed. “Weasley could do better than that.” Malfoy’s eyebrows furled and his face puckered. Harry took Malfoy’s pouting moment to glance up at the front of the classroom. Hermione brought her bird back from nothingness. Ron’s efforts had less effect than Malfoy’s. In fact, Harry saw nothing happen.

“Well?” Malfoy called. “Are you going to watch your girlfriend and her diamonds all morning, or are you going to demonstrate your own worthlessness as a wizard.”

Harry pulled out his own wand and pointed it at the bird. "Invsitata!" he cast, and the eagle began to fade. The bird's head disappeared, but then nothing more happened. "Cresco!" he called and the bird reappeared fully. This time, Malfoy laughed.

"I just had a vision of your future, Potter!" he said, and grinned.

"If you can't do better, Malfoy, just admit it now and leave the room. I'm sure Snape has some socks and underwear he needs washed again." With that, Malfoy stiffened and the competition was on. By the end of the period the two had mastered the skill, while most the class was still having only marginal success. Ron was having no success at all. Harry could see Hermione trying to explain the wrist movement, but Ron never had liked her lecturing him. His best progress had always been made with Harry when she wasn't even watching. He was growing redder and more irritable by the second. Finally, he burst.

"Quit trying to show off!" Ron yelled. "You're just a pratty little know-it-all who likes to lord it over other people." The class turned to the commotion in front. Know-it-all was the one insult that had always cut Hermione deepest. She turned red herself, and raised her wand at Ron.

"Invsitata!" she yelled clear and strong. Ron stood motionless, which was perhaps a mistake. His clothes began to disappear in front of everyone. A quick glance down told him what everyone was laughing at. Immediately he shot for the door. His movement brought his clothes back and covered his skin, but by now everyone, except Hermione and Harry, was screaming with laughter. Harry darted to the door after Ron. A few started to follow and he stopped them.

"No!" Harry yelled. "You'll stay here."

"Everyone to their seats!" Professor Flitwick commanded. The students returned as Harry chased Ron down the hall.

"Ron! Stop!" he called. "I'll change it back." Hearing Harry's words, Ron ducked into an alcove behind a suit of armor and waited for

Harry to catch up. A moment later, Harry turned in to meet Ron, his wand in hand.

"I can't believe she turned my clothes invisible!" he yelled. Harry just stood there, his jaw open, and his eyes wide. "What?" Ron asked. "What's the matter?" But Harry couldn't speak; his heart was pounding. Instead, Harry pointed his wand at the back of the suit of armor.

"Argenta!" he whispered. The back of the soldier's armor turned mirror-like. Harry pointed for Ron to see his reflection. Ron walked over and looked.

"No," he whispered reaching his hands to his back but unable to grasp the thing he was reaching for. It was too deep.

Not only had his clothes disappeared, but as he stood still long enough, so too had his skin and bone. What was revealed was the human vascular system. Harry stared at the model before him. A model he'd seen in books on anatomy. Only this model had one difference. High on the neck was a weaving network of arteries and veins that no human ever had. It was a twisted web that curled around his spine down to the middle of his back. What was worse was the network that moved from the middle of his neck upward. This moving fluid was not red or purple; it was a dark green. It wove its way up his neck to his brain invading its lower quarter in a web of darkness with tentacles that poked deeper in. For all appearances, it was a green weed winding its way into Ron's skull.

Try as he might, Ron couldn't touch it. "Take it out Harry! Take it out!" he yelled clawing at his neck.

"Cresco!" Harry whispered and Ron's form, fully clothed, reappeared. Ron's fingers were bloody. He had torn at the scar on his neck. His collar was red, and the wound was seeping blood. Harry grabbed Ron's arms and pulled them to his side. He held Ron's eyes in his. "You've got to come with me Ron." His words were firm and direct, but Ron tried to pull away.

"I can't go," he said shaking his head madly. "I won't go!" he yelled. But Harry held tight to his arms as Ron backed against the wall.

"We've got to do this, Ron," Harry whispered. "I want to help you."

"Liar!" Ron snapped. "You hate my guts, Potter!" But Harry was undeterred.

"No more lies, Ron, remember?" Holding Ron by the shoulders against the wall, Harry closed his eyes and opened his mind.

A picture flashed of the first time Harry and Ron met on the Hogwarts Express... a film played of their flight in the Ford Anglia... Harry stood horrified watching as Ron was pulled into the Whomping Willow... they were in the Ministry as the brain wrapped around Ron while Harry chose to run hoping the Death Eaters would take him instead. There were many visions Ron could see in Harry's mind, but the most plentiful were those of the two of them together... just friends. The projections stopped and Ron slumped onto an old wooden chest, his hands in his face.

"I... I can't do this anymore, Harry," he choked into his hands. "I've got to end it."

"Then come with me," Harry said, lifting Ron back to his feet. "Trust me Ron. I won't let them turn you into a lab rat." He pulled Ron's hands down and looked up into his eyes again. "I swear."

Finally, Ron nodded and rubbed his face again taking a deep breath. "Thanks, Harry." Together, the two walked down the corridor to the hospital wing to visit Madame Pomfrey. A very pretty fifth year from Hufflepuff ran past them going the other direction. She was a new student, and Harry remembered her at the sorting, but they didn't share any classes.

"You know, Ron," said Harry, as they both looked back over their shoulders. "If you ask around, I think you might manage a few dates this week."

“Why’s that?” Ron asked, suddenly swerving to avoid running into a pillar.

“Well, you were naked in front of the whole class. It won’t be long before word gets out about your special attribute, and the ladies start lining up at your door.” Ron flamed bright red.

“Would you stop,” said Ron, shoving Harry on the shoulder and laughing. For the first time in a long time, Harry laughed with him. When they arrived at the doors to the hospital ward, Ron was in a better mood, but still apprehensive. For a moment, he hesitated.

“You have my word,” Harry whispered. With that, Ron pushed the doors open, and they walked in.

“Harry! Ron!”

The voice wasn’t that of Madame Pomfrey; it was Cho Chang.

Chapter 27 - Flying to the Falls

"We have an agreement for now, Harry," Dumbledore said with warm eyes, while Harry grinned from ear to ear. "As long as he continues to improve."

"He will sir," Harry assured him. "Madam Pomfrey says..."

"Yes, yes," Dumbledore interrupted. "We've been over all this for the past three days. It's against my better judgment, and if..."

"I'm sorry sir," Harry cut in. "It's getting late, and I promised Cho we would practice out on the pitch."

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow. "Practice?" he asked.

"Flying, sir," Harry replied eager to leave before Dumbledore changed his mind. The creases that had lined Dumbledore's face of late seemed to vanish, and a warmth filled his blue eyes.

"Remarkable, Harry," the wizard whispered. He put his hand on Harry's shoulder and walked him to the door. "Truly remarkable."

When Harry burst out of the castle, Caduceus in hand, he found the air crisp and the sky blue. It was Saturday, and the last two days had been his best since he'd come to Hogwarts. Seeing the severity of what was attacking Ron's brain, Madame Pomfrey was able to stop it, and in fact somewhat shrink the growing green mass. She was not, however, able to remove it completely. Still, the treatments were already having a noticeable effect on Ron. His headaches had diminished and his general mood had improved dramatically. He was also learning to shut out the unwanted voices--Occlumency with Professor Snape. Fortunately, Professor Snape's hatred of Harry didn't transfer to Ron Weasley, and the first two lessons seemed to go rather well according to Hermione. Against her will, she again found herself Ron and Harry's go-between. After three hard days of campaigning with Professor Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey, Harry had fulfilled his pledge to Ron, but he still refused to associate with someone who couldn't accept people for what they were inside.

Outside, there was the slightest breeze in the air, and a squawking brought Harry's eyes up to the sky. A flock of white geese were flying south for the winter. Some two-dozen birds formed a large V in the air. Harry thought of Hedwig. She had still not returned. "It's over," he sighed to himself still stroking the silver earring that had never left his ear. Before falling asleep each night, it was the thought of Gabriella that was the last to leave his mind. But for the last three mornings, when he woke, it was the thought of Cho that was the first to enter.

He had risen early every morning to visit her in the hospital wing. She was trying to catch up on the work she'd missed in preparation for starting classes on Monday. Her mind was clear and sharp, and her ability to learn what she had missed over the last four weeks was astounding. Cho's attitude was upbeat and positive even though she still had little to no use of her right leg and was barely able to lift her right arm. Already, she had mastered writing with her left hand. "A true Ravenclaw," Harry admired. When he brought up flying her first night back, she began to cry.

"I'll never fly again, Harry." He held her tight until the tears had stopped. She had cut her hair short, and he stroked the left side of her head around her ear. He could feel the scar hidden behind her dark hair. Forehead to forehead, his green eyes looked deep into her brown.

"Yes you will," he said firmly. "This weekend." And a smile broke across her face.

The geese disappeared over the top of the castle and Harry continued to the pitch. As he approached he saw Cho standing at the north entrance. Well, not really standing so much as levitating. She was using a self-locomotion spell to move herself about. Other students were forbidden to use such spells in the interest of physical fitness. For Cho, however, it was her only practical means of getting from one part of the castle to the other.

In her left hand was her broom, a Nimbus 2001. For a moment Harry watched as she tried to mount the broom with her good leg holding fast with her good arm. A few feet from the ground, she switched and tried to hold with her right hand. The transfer was awkward and her

center of balance shifted. Her right leg couldn't compensate and she spun off, hitting the ground hard with her left shoulder. Harry ran over and helped her to her feet. She held tight to his neck as he lifted. Far from being upset, Cho was as determined as ever.

"Well, that didn't work," she said in a matter of fact tone. She balanced on her left leg and brushed the grass off her pants with her left arm. "Without my right leg, Harry, I can't keep my balance." She looked to the sky. "A stiff wind and I'm done for."

"I said you'd fly again," said Harry confidently. "I didn't say it would be easy."

"Nope," Cho grunted trying to reach for her broom. "I think not." Harry took her hand, and straightened her up.

"I have another idea," he said. He had dropped his broom about twenty feet away. He was helping her balance so, without pulling out his wand, he raised his hand and called, "Accio Caduceus!" The broom popped into his hand. Cho gasped.

"You didn't..." she began.

"No, er... no I didn't," Harry stopped her. "Bit of a new trick I've picked up. I'd rather you not talk about it, not yet, okay?" Her eyes were wide, but then she smiled warmly and nodded.

"So many secrets, Harry," she said. "Will I ever learn them all?" Harry returned half a smile, but did not reply. Cho's eyes seemed to assess Harry as she said, "A challenge then."

"Here, try this," said Harry, handing her his broom and trying to shift the conversation. "Its charms hold you tight at two-hundred miles per hour. Let's see how they hold at two miles per hour." As before she mounted with her good leg. Harry could see that her center of balance was off, but the Caduceus compensated. Within a few seconds she was flying some twenty feet off the ground. Her face was beaming.

“Not too high Cho!” Harry called. Cho, grinning wildly, nosed the broom down, but wasn’t ready for its quick response. Instantly, she was hurtling toward Harry. She pulled up on the nose and the broom stopped dead. Instinctively, Cho released the broom and held out her hand to stop her fall. It was exactly the wrong thing to do. While the broom stopped, she kept going, flipped in the middle of the air, and landed on Harry who was trying as best he could to catch her. Their heads hit and together they crashed to the ground. For a second Harry was dazed.

“Oh, Harry, are you okay?” Cho asked brushing the hair from the side of his face. Harry seemed to be having a tough time breathing, but when she turned his head to look at her, she saw that it was because he was laughing.

“I can’t.... I can’t... hah, hee, hee,” Harry breathed. “Whooo! Did you see that? A triple summersault with a half twist!” He laughed again. “You should be in the Olympics! Hah... hah... heh...” The laughter was contagious and soon both of them were laughing hard with tears running down their cheeks. The sight was comical: Cho on top of Harry, splayed out on the grass in the middle of the Quidditch pitch. Finally, their laughter slowed, Cho wiped the tears from her eyes and held her hand to Harry’s face.

“I... I haven’t laughed since I saw you in the hospital,” she whispered. “Thank you.” She leaned down and kissed him lightly on the lips. Harry closed his eyes. The kiss was warm and gentle, and his heart began to race. Cho rolled over on her back feeling the thick, soft, grass beneath her. “What a beautiful day,” she said with a smile as she took in the blue sky. Harry put his hands behind his head and crossed his legs.

“Yes,” he said, “a beautiful day.” Examining the sky together they began to describe what creatures or people they could see in the few clouds that billowed by. “Cho,” he said, “I’m as happy today as I’ve been since I arrived.” He sat up and looked down at her. “And it’s all your fault!” He grinned, tickling her right side. She pulled away smiling. He reached out and held her right hand, and began stroking the fingers. “Can you feel that?” he asked.

"Yes," she sighed. "I have feeling in my leg too. It just won't do what my mind tells it to. The connections in my brain have been destroyed." She let out another deep breath. "Every day's a bit better though." Her words brought one of his chief concerns to the surface. His mind was caught on something he needed to know.

"And Malfoy?" Harry asked. Cho's eyes narrowed. "If you could have your way, would you have him destroyed?" His words were almost an offer. There was a somewhat sour smile that appeared on her face. Harry continued. "Most all of Ravenclaw is ready to tear anyone from Slytherin apart for what he did to you. I... I almost killed Malfoy myself." Harry's eyes faded off to somewhere across the pitch in the general direction of Hogsmeade. With her good hand, Cho pushed herself up level with Harry.

"When I arrived at Hogwarts the other night, my brother was in the hospital wing waiting for me. After I was settled in, he just paced the room from one side to the next. I could tell he was uncomfortable, and I finally asked him why. He told me that Malfoy had come up to him the day I was healed and apologized for what he'd done. He was fearful I'd be mad that he accepted the apology."

"Were you?" Harry asked.

"No," she paused. "I already accepted it myself."

"You... H-How?" Harry stammered.

"He and his mom came by St. Mungo's for a visit." She paused, thinking back in time, and all sourness left her face. "When I saw the scar on his face, my first thought was that he put it there himself, some sort of mark of support for You-Know-Who. I pointed at the scar and told him he could leave, if he was in league with... but he stopped my words. He said you put the mark there and wouldn't take it off."

"On the train," Harry nodded. "After..."

"He was... well... a different person, Harry," Cho continued. "Or maybe he was pretending to be. He apologized... his mom

apologized... I don't know. What could I do? Tell them to shove off? So I accepted. They only stayed for a few more minutes, and most of that time was spent talking about you."

"About me?" Harry asked. "What about me?"

"Now I have a secret," she said with a grin, and pinched his side. The sun was dipping behind the high stadium seats to the west of the pitch casting a shadow over the two. The late afternoon breeze was beginning to pick up, and Cho began to shiver.

"We'd better get in," Harry said. He stood and helped Cho to her feet. She held him tight, more tightly than she really needed thought Harry happily. His broom was still floating some five feet off the ground. Seeing it, his eyes began to twinkle. "One more ride?" he offered. "Together?" Cho smiled and nodded. Harry mounted first and then Cho climbed on from behind holding him around the waist first with one hand and then more lightly with the other. Immediately the cool bite of the air disappeared. They were both warm and felt no breeze.

"It's amazing," she whispered her chin tight against his shoulder.

"Hold tight," he said. "This is what's amazing." And with that, Harry shot up from the ground high into the sky. The castle and the grounds fell away instantly growing smaller and smaller. A gentle nudge of the broom, and they were flying twenty feet off the canopy of the Forbidden Forest. A Threstral appeared on Harry's left flank and seemed to enjoy chasing along side the two of them. Cho didn't or couldn't see it. Harry arced to the right, and the Threstral sunk back into the trees. They pushed deeper into the center of the forest, when suddenly it opened up into a large clearing that revealed a tall cliff from which cascaded a large shimmering waterfall. Harry had never seen this place. He circled back and saw pools below. They were beautiful and inviting, but he knew better than to stop for a closer look.

"I think I've seen enough trees, how about some water," Cho whispered in Harry's ear and she squeezed Harry close. Seeing the glistening falls below, he was a bit confused by her words, but brought the broom back toward the castle and soon they were over the lake. He dropped the broom close to the water and accelerated.

The broom's wake caused the water to spray into the sky as they past by. In seconds, they were nearly upon Hogsmeade. "We can't..." she began but Harry dropped his shoulder and they gently turned back once again toward the castle. As they came close, he pulled up high, and then plunged in a sharp dive toward the pitch from where they started.

"Don't let go this time," Harry called. But Cho was holding tight, her heart racing. A few feet from the ground, Harry pulled up and gently stopped. Cho let out a deep breath and loosened her grip ever so slightly. The sun was fading into the horizon as a bright full moon rose in the east. She laid her head against his back.

"Not bad," she said breathlessly and then laughed. They both got off the Caduceus and Cho brought out her wand. "Mi-Locomotus!" she called and her feet rose about six inches from the ground. "Accio broom!" Her Nimbus 2001 flew to her hands. "Is it time for dinner do you think? I may like to try the Great Hall tonight."

Together they made their way up to the castle. They were about to enter when Harry stopped and took Cho's hand.

"It was a perfect day, Cho," he said but there was sadness on his voice.

"Yes?" Cho asked anticipating more.

"It's just that... I need to tell you..." His words were stopped as Anthony Goldstein burst through the doors. He was a bit surprised to see the two of them at the entranceway, and took half a moment to gather his bearings.

"There you are!" he called to Cho and ignoring Harry. "I was just to the hospital wing and Madame Pomfrey is frantic. You were supposed to be back over an hour ago."

"Well, I thought maybe dinner in..." Cho started.

"Exactly!" Anthony cut in. "I'll get you to the hospital wing and," he shot a glance at Harry, "order up two dinners. Not to worry, I'll keep

you company tonight,” he said with a smile. Cho glanced at Harry and back to Anthony.

“Harry,” she said, “maybe we can finish our talk tomorrow?”

Harry nodded. “Sure,” he said. “Hey, Anthony, Cho was up flying today. She’s brilliant.”

“You were?” said Anthony, surprised. “That’s fantastic! I told you she was terrific, didn’t I Harry?” Anthony asked without moving his eyes from Cho.

“You sure did,” answered Harry, but his own smile was fading.

“You can do anything you put your mind to Cho, anything,” Anthony beamed taking her broom. “Come on. Let’s get you back to Madame Pomfrey.” Cho sighed, but she wore a smile on her face as she and Anthony went into the castle leaving Harry behind.

Harry started to walk back toward the pitch, but then stopped and sat against the base of a large statue. Broom in hand, he watched as the stars began to appear overhead. The familiar feeling of loneliness was beginning to encircle his heart again. It was growing dark, and his attention turned to the large red star overhead. He wasn’t supposed to be out of the castle after dark. “Who would notice?” he thought. “Who would care?” Maybe someone. He stood up and mounted his broom. A flash later, and he was in front of Hagrid’s cabin. He pounded on the door.

“Hagrid!” he called. “Hagrid!” There was no answer. “Probably at dinner,” Harry whispered to himself. He sat on the footstep to Hagrid’s cabin and looked back at the castle. Two students were running up the steps from the lake. Hearing them laugh, he thought of his afternoon with Cho and a smile crossed his face. It had been a truly spectacular day. He had no reason to mope. He stood up and began to walk toward the castle, when a voice caught him by surprise.

“Harry Potter, you should not be out after dark.” It was Firenze. He had walked from behind Hagrid’s cabin. “These times are far too dangerous, and you, above all, are wanted dearly.”

"It's good to see you too Firenze," Harry said. "Don't your fellow Centaurs want you dead as well?"

"I am still unwelcome," Firenze said, looking back to the Forbidden Forest. "But soon they too will see." He looked to the darkening sky. "The heavens are in motion." He looked back to Harry, and said nothing more. Centaurs never did say much, and Firenze was no exception.

"Well," Harry said feeling the first pangs of hunger, "I've got to be going."

"I believe," Firenze said, "Hagrid is still eating within the castle. If you see him, tell him that I have finished for tonight."

"Finished what?" Harry asked, but Firenze simply bowed his head and trotted around the back of the castle.

When Harry entered the Great Hall, most everyone was done eating. Hagrid and Tonks were the only two professors at the head table. Before sitting to eat, Harry walked over to deliver his message.

"Hello, Harry," Tonks said.

"Hello, Professor's," said Harry with a shiny grin. The words made Hagrid puff out his chest a bit. "Hagrid, I have a message from Firenze. He says he's finished for the night." Hagrid stroked his beard and nodded.

"Very good, very good," he said. "He never tires I tell yeh. Well," Hagrid stood and so did Tonks, "thank yeh Harry. Got teh be goin' now."

"Yes," Tonks added, "I have a few things to prepare as well."

"But what did Firenze finish, Hagrid?" Harry asked.

"Ah, never yeh mind, Harry. Nothin' important." And with that Hagrid and Tonks left the Great Hall.

As Harry sat at the Gryffindor table, Parvati and Lavender rushed in and sat next to him, oblivious to his presence.

"Five more minutes, Lavender," Parvati gasped, "and we would have missed dinner!" Then looking at Harry she said, "Oh... Hi, Harry."

"I know, I know," Lavender breathed, "but it was worth it! I told you didn't I?" And then as an afterthought, "Er, Hi, Harry."

"Yes, yes" said Parvati with excitement. "You were right. Just like clockwork." Plates appeared on the table and the two began to eat. Parvati took a drink of water and sighed dreamily. "Do you think he noticed?" she asked.

"Centaur's notice everything," Lavender replied. "But who cares." She smiled.

"So," Harry jumped in awkwardly, "what's going on?" The two young women seemed to suddenly notice that Harry was sitting with them, and worse, listening. Indeed, he was trying to put their words together in his mind when Lavender's eyes looked up past Harry.

"Oh! I haven't seen her in ages, Harry," she said. "She's so beautiful, don't you think Parvati?" Harry looked just in time to hold out his arm and let Hedwig perch. Instantly, his heart began to pound. His fingers trembled as he stroked her feathers looking for any kind of injury, but she was fine. Her feathers were brilliant white, and if anything she looked a bit plumper than when she left. Harry held her close, and when he breathed in, the scent of Gabriella filled his head. Memories of her black hair and black eyes rushed into his mind. Harry kissed Hedwig on the head.

"You're okay?" he asked. Hedwig hooted, and Harry smiled. Suddenly he found his whole body trembling as he looked down to see what, if anything, was on her leg. There was an envelope, and on its face the word Harry. He took the note from Hedwig's leg; she hooted and flew off to the owlery.

"You're wonderful with her," Lavender said. "I can see she loves you too." Harry looked at her, somewhat confused by her words.

"Oh, yeah," he said staring at the folded yellow parchment he'd just removed from the envelope. "She's my best friend I think." Once again, the two girls started to chat with each other, but Harry's mind didn't hear a word. Was this it? Was Gabriella finally going to say their paths had pulled apart? He looked about the Great Hall. There were too many students still eating. He couldn't open this here, not now. He wasn't sure what his reaction would be. He could feel his emotions starting to get away from him. Perspiration was beading on his forehead.

"Harry, are you feeling alright?" Lavender asked. His mouth was dry and he was starting to feel quite hot.

"Erm, I got to go," he said weakly and left the Great Hall. Without thinking he began searching for someplace to unfold the parchment. He walked blindly down one corridor after another, but every alcove, every turn was filled with students. Where had they all come from? He began to descend a flight of stairs. The air was cooler here, and less crowded. He turned left and left again. Finally, he was alone. He sat on a stone bench and slowly unfolded the parchment. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears.

Harry My Love,

Where has the time gone? I wanted to write sooner, but I couldn't. Tonight is my first night home in weeks. Mama was taken seriously ill and was just released from the hospital. Each night I spent alone in the hospital, I stared out the window at the stars thinking of you. At home, I left my window open for Hedwig, free to fly to you, but when I came home tonight she was still here. I must have held her in my arms for an hour wishing she were you. I'm trembling as I write, wondering what you must think of me. I'm so sorry, Harry.

It's awful about your friend being sent to the hospital. I hope he has recovered and I hope you're okay. Mama's doing better, but her mind still seems to wander off on its own at times. Papa's grown thin with worry. I wish so that you were here with me now. I don't know how I'll

ever catch up with all the class I've missed at Stonewall, and Mama needs my help at home now more than ever. I don't think I can do it the way we've chosen to live.

Please write back soon and tell me you're okay. I need to know you're okay--my heart has been so worried. And please don't hate me.

I miss you terribly.

Love,

Gabriella

Harry's heart was still pounding as he read the letter for the third time. He was joyous she was okay, and worried about Soseh. He found his fingers again tracing her script. He breathed in the smell of her perfume from the parchment and smiled. There was a rusted creak as a door opened. Too late, he realized he was in the dungeons as Snape emerged from the Potions classroom.

"Oh no," Harry whispered.

Snape took only two steps before realizing Harry was sitting before him. His eyes narrowed and his eyebrows furled in. At first he said nothing, as if turning an apple over in his hand trying to decide where to take the first bite.

"Why are you here, Potter?" Snape asked coolly. Harry folded the letter into his hand.

"No reason," he shrugged. Snape looked up and down the corridor. It was quiet, too quiet. He clearly suspected foul play, but what was it? Harry tried to casually slide the letter into his pocket, but Snape was too sharp to miss the move.

"What is in your hand?" he pressed.

"Nothing," Harry said calmly. Immediately Snape's wand was pointed toward Harry. Pain shot down Harry's right arm. "Accio Parchment!" Snape called. The paper slipped through Harry's fingers. He had no

time to reach for his own wand. Ignoring the pain he raised his right hand.

“Incendio!” The letter burst into flames just before it reached Snape’s hand. Snape’s fingers curled around the flaming paper. He let out a small cry and threw the graying embers to the ground stomping on them. Harry was both nervous about Snape’s next move and incensed that he had just burned Gabriella’s letter. At first Snape’s face was furious.

“Follow me, Potter!” he yelled turning back into the Potions classroom. Harry followed, but as he cautiously entered the classroom he slipped his hand into his robes and held his wand at the ready. Snape opened a cabinet and pulled out a glass jar containing orange paste. “Of all the idiotic...” he muttered to himself. He gently dabbed the paste onto his blistered hand, and then wiped it clean with a dry cloth; the blisters disappeared.

“Sit down!” Snape yelled over his shoulder. He turned leaning back against the cabinet to look at Harry. “Let go of your wand, or you’ll be in detention for the rest of the school year.” Reluctantly, Harry released his wand, but ensured it protruded ever so slightly from his sleeve.

“I had heard about your new ability Potter,” he began. “Burning paper without a wand is,” he paused, “notable.” Harry, his face scowling, refused to say a word. “You’re angry, Potter. Why?” He began to examine Harry again. “What was on the paper?” Harry was silent, and try as he might to stay calm he could feel the anger rising up inside him. All year long he’d been able to remain calm, but for some reason he was losing control. He didn’t want Professor Snape to notice the anger flushing his face, so he turned his back to the professor. “Was it a note,” Snape jeered, “from one of your many admirers?” Harry’s arm was throbbing, his breath growing heavy. He didn’t understand why, but his mind was raging. Snape wanted Gabriella, and Harry couldn’t let that happen; he had to protect her. In his thoughts, he began to imagine wrapping his fingers around Snape’s neck and squeezing. At that very moment Snape reached for his throat and began to gasp. Harry, his back still turned, took no notice. His mind continued to flame with anger squeezing his fingers

more tightly around Snape's windpipe. Snape fell to his knees knocking the jar of orange paste to the floor and shattering the glass. The sound broke Harry's trance and he turned to see what happened.

"Professor!" he called out, truly concerned. Snape began to heave in large breaths of air holding himself steady with the edge of the cabinet. Quickly, Harry ran over to his side. "What's wrong? The potion?" Harry asked, helping Professor Snape to his feet. The sincerity in Harry's voice clashed with Snape's suspicions. "Is it your hand?" Harry asked again, still clueless as to what he'd just done.

"No you fool!" Snape croaked. He planted both his feet and took in another deep breath. Professor Snape shook his head trying to focus his thoughts. "Sit down," he whispered. His voice was regaining its composure. He began to pace toward the front of the classroom and back. He was torn about something, and finally he stopped and stared at Harry. "Dumbledore asked me to pass on this news directly to you," he said through gritted teeth. "There is a plan underway to remove you from the castle." His words were slow and deliberate, and then he added flippantly, "Perhaps to run errands as a farmhand." Snape's eyes narrowed in warning and then became impassive. "That is all, you may go." He turned and flicked his wand cleaning the broken glass off the floor.

"What?" Harry squawked. "Is that it?" He was dumbfounded, first that he would hear any news of plans, second that the news would come from Snape, and finally that it would be so bloody vague. "That's all you can tell me, or all you will tell me?" It was Harry's voice that was now cool. Snape shut the cabinet door and looked at Harry.

"You'll repeat nothing that was said here tonight, Potter; not to a student, not to a professor... any professor. Dumbledore is consumed with your protection, and the Dark Lord is consumed with your destruction." Snape shook his head. "Why, I have no idea. It will be the downfall of one, or the other, I'm sure of it," he spat. "Please, don't let your ego kill another of the Order this year." His words slithered out his tongue and fell on the floor like so many snakes. Harry clenched his fists.

"I said," Snape spoke sharply, "you may go." He flicked his wand and the iron door to the dungeon flung open.

Snape's words stabbed Harry's heart. Forcing himself to remain calm, Harry slowly turned and walked out. He began to tremble with anger as he passed through the heavy iron doors when, suddenly, they slammed themselves shut, reverberating down the empty corridor, and shaking mortar from between the stone walls into a fine dust cloud that filled the Potions room in his absence. As he began to stride down the corridor back to the Gryffindor common room, he could hear with satisfaction Professor Snape choking on the dust-filled air. It would take some time before those doors would open again.

Chapter 28 - Gray to Green

"You have done well," hissed Harry's voice to a cloaked figure bowed low on one knee before him. "If your holiday is successful, you will be rewarded greatly. Fail, and..." Harry held out his wand with gnarled, white fingers, "Crucio!" he spat. The figure fell to the floor screaming in agony. Satisfied, a smile spread across Harry's face as he left the room, but when he went through the door he found himself in the middle of a field. The fog was thick, but he could see that the grass all around his feet was dead and he could feel that the air was cold. He exhaled and his breath billowed before him in a smoky cloud. Somewhere to his left there was the trickling sound of water. Cautiously, he walked toward the sound, and as it grew near his heart became more fearful. The fog began to clear when there was a loud scream. From the haze a large reddish figure came galloping toward him. It crashed into his chest knocking him to the ground.

Breathless, Harry heard the voice whisper in his ear, "Rebirth grows near."

Harry opened his eyes to a face full of red hair. He was in his bed, but for some reason, Ron was on top of him, the back of his head planted against Harry's nose.

"I'll rip you to shreds, Ron!" Dean yelled out and soon Dean was on top of Ron, on top of Harry. Harry gasped for air as Ron and Dean flailed at each other on top of him. Goyle reached down and grabbed Dean lifting him off of Ron. Freed from his attacker, Ron stood up and reached for his wand, but Neville grabbed him from behind pulling him back as best he could. A quick glance to the window told Harry it was early morning, the faintest hint of the day's promised sun was striking a hint of gold on the clouded horizon. Harry stood up between the two adversaries, rubbing his eyes. They were both struggling to free themselves from their respective captors.

"Stop it!" Harry yelled, but they continued to struggle. "Ron, what's going on?" he asked.

"He... he...!" yelled Ron. "Let me go, Neville!" cried Ron, trying to wrench his arms free. Harry took note that Neville was doing a very good job at holding back his larger classmate.

"He hexed me!" Dean yelled out. "In my sleep, he hexed me!" The side of Dean's face was dotted with orange blisters. "I'll kill him!" Dean began kicking at Goyle with little more effect at freeing himself than Ron.

"Hold still," Harry said to Dean, taking his wand from off the table. "Cicatra," he whispered. Blue light bathed Dean's face and the blisters faded away. "Goyle, haul him downstairs to cool off. I need to talk to Ron." Goyle turned to Ron for affirmation. Ron stopped struggling and nodded his head. A few moments after Goyle disappeared with a squirming Dean, while Neville reluctantly released his grasp on Ron.

"Neville," Harry said, "do you mind if I talk to Ron alone?" Neville nodded back.

"My gram always says to take a deep breath when you're mad, Ron. Give it a try." He headed to the exit. "I'll be just outside if you need a hand." Ron took in a deep breath of air. The tension in his face began to recede.

When the two were alone, Harry sat back on his bed rubbing his nose. "You almost broke it," he said. Ron followed suit and sat down on his own bed.

"Sorry," he said in a low voice. He began to rub his temples.

"Well?" Harry asked. "What happened?"

"As if you care, Harry," Ron snapped without looking up. He stood and began pacing the room.

Four weeks had passed since Ron had started getting help. When he was in large crowds, he could now stop the voices from penetrating his thoughts. The new treatments and his skill at Occlumency had eliminated his headaches, improving his mood considerably. On the

Quidditch pitch, he was impenetrable. His side of the field had been nicknamed the Weasley Wall. In fact, Katie often subbed Sloper as Keeper so the team could get some practice scoring.

"I care if you're going to break my nose!" Harry snapped back. His shoulder ached. The mark on his forearm had not disappeared after his night with Snape. It would fade, but never completely, and now it was burning. If Ron's mood was improving, Harry's was getting worse. But, there was no reason for it. He'd started writing to Gabriella again. Each new post brought word that Soseh was slowly improving as life in Little Whinging returned to normal. Yet, whenever Gabriella would mention having fun with Duncan, or Emma, or even Wes, who seemed to be helping her through her homework, Harry grew angry. It wasn't fair that she could be having any fun without him. He wanted her to be as miserable as he was, but she wasn't, and that made Harry angrier. Of course, he knew he didn't want her to be miserable, but that only stoked his self-hatred. To make matters worse, or better (Harry didn't know), he'd been spending more and more time with Cho. Guilt was gnawing at him, but he kept pushing it aside. They had grown comfortable holding hands, or even giving each other friendly kisses, but in Harry's mind, it wasn't serious... nothing really. But he knew it wasn't fair to Cho... to Gabriella. And as each day passed, Anthony became more and more upset at the time Cho was spending with Harry. Still seated on his bed, Harry pushed the thoughts aside.

"He was sleeping, Ron!" Harry started again. "What could he possibly do to you if he was sleeping?" Ron stopped pacing the floor to look out the window.

"Dream," Ron whispered. "He can dream."

"Ron, you didn't..."

"I was asleep myself," Ron shot back. "It was there before my eyes... the two of them... the two of them... Argh!" He kicked his table breaking the leg out from under it and spilling books and papers to the floor.

"It was a dream, Ron," said Harry, trying to stay cool. "Dean's dream. It wasn't real."

"I'm takin' a shower," Ron said grabbing a towel. "I need to cool off."

"Ron, prefects can't go around hexing their classmates. You owe Dean an apology, or he might see you lose that silver badge of yours."

"And you'd like that, wouldn't you?" Ron sneered, heading off to the showers. As Ron stomped off, Harry noticed a loud rhythmic thumping noise coming from the common room.

"What now," Harry whispered to himself. Still in his pajamas, Harry started down the stairs. He could hear Ginny's voice before he saw the scene.

"And if I ever..." she cried out followed by a loud thump, "see you..." thump. Harry entered the room to find Dean sitting on the ground dazed and Ginny holding out her wand at Goyle who was levitated into the air and being pounded against the stones above the fireplace mantle. There was a flash of light as Colin Creevey snapped a photograph. The other few Gryffindors that had risen this early were standing all around not sure what to do. "...touch one hair..." thump. Goyle's nose began to bleed. "...of another Gryffindor..." thump. "...I swear I'll..." thump.

"Ginny!" Harry called. She broke the spell and Goyle fell to the floor landing half in, half out of the fireplace. Quickly, Harry pulled him out.

"Let him burn," Ginny yelled. "He nearly choked Dean to death! If I hadn't..."

"That's because," Harry cut in, "Dean was about to annihilate your brother." Harry's words seemed to stem Ginny's venom toward Goyle, or at least redirect it. She turned to Dean who was just getting to his feet.

"What's he talking about?" she snapped.

"He... he hexed me!" Dean stammered trying to regain his composure. "He hexed me in my sleep!"

"For what?" she queried again.

"I don't know," Dean replied rubbing his arm. "Ask him!"

"I will!" Ginny yelled and charged up to the boys' dormitories.

"Ginny he's in the shower," Harry called out. "You can't..."

"As if I care," she howled back. "It's time for a family meeting!" And she disappeared up the stairs. Harry helped Goyle to his feet.

"Looks like our Beater's taken quite a beating," Harry said with a thin smile. Goyle glowered holding his nose. Drops of blood fell to the floor. Dean started up the stairs. "Stop there, Dean," Harry called out. "You heard Ginny. This is a family matter." Dean stopped for a second and started up again. "Thomas!" Harry yelled. "I fixed your face this morning. I can put it back again!" Dean stopped and sulked back into the common room flopping into one of the overstuffed chairs. Harry turned back to Goyle who was still dripping blood onto the floor.

"Here," said Harry with a sigh, and holding up his wand to Goyle's face, "let me see that." Goyle's eyes widened and he stepped back. "Merlin's beard, Goyle, let me fix your nose." Goyle stepped back again falling over the couch by the fireplace and nearly landing in the embers again.

"What's the commotion?" Hermione called out just emerging from the girls' dormitory. She walked over to see Harry's wand drawn and Goyle bleeding, and shot Harry a vicious look. "Come on, Greg. Let me fix that." Goyle got to his feet and let Hermione stop the bleeding.

"It wasn't me!" Harry said defiantly. He pointed to the loosened stones above their heads. "Ginny was smashing him against the wall."

"Ginny?" Hermione asked confused.

"Yes," Ginny's voice echoed in the room. She descended the staircase and walked over to Goyle. "I owe you an apology, Greg. I'm sorry." She held out her hand to his. "Forgive me?" Slowly, he reached out and held her hand in his.

"Only if you score at least forty against Ravenclaw," he said, trying to muster a smile, and then he shook her hand.

"Deal," Ginny replied smiling. "Where's.... There you are!" She walked over and sat on Dean's lap, whispered something in his ear, and kissed him on the forehead. "Promise?" she asked out loud. Dean nodded.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked Harry. Goyle started up the stairs as Harry walked Hermione to the side of the common room. Colin snapped another photo of Ginny on Dean's lap.

"Creevey!" Dean yelled. But Colin simply smiled and left for breakfast stepping through the portrait of the Fat Lady. At the corner of the room, Harry told Hermione all that had happened.

"For what he was dreaming?" she asked incredulously. Harry nodded.

"HARRY!" Goyle yelled from somewhere upstairs. It was the first time he'd ever used Harry's first name, and Harry knew at once something was terribly wrong. Harry left Hermione and darted up the stairs to the boys' dormitory.

"Goyle! Where are you?" he yelled out of breath.

"In the shower!" Goyle called back.

Harry ran into the bathroom to find Goyle shaking at the entrance to the showers.

"What is it?" Harry asked pulling his wand. Goyle just pointed and stammered. Harry entered to see Ron stuck a good three feet up against the wall with what looked like a huge spider webbing. Except for his horrified face and bare feet, he was completely encased with his arms and legs extended. Creeping across the ceiling and along

the floor were about a dozen black furry spiders the size of small poodles. One had just put its leg on Ron's bare foot and hoisted itself up onto the web in which he was encased. The collective clicking of pincers buzzed in Harry's ears.

"G-G-Greg, g-g-get rid of it!" Ron stammered. Slowly the spider made its way up Ron's web-covered leg toward his belly. "Greg!"

"Brilliant," Harry whispered with a smile. "Some family meeting."

"Don't just stand there!" Ron's screeched. "Get it off! Get it off!" Plastered to the wall, Ron could barely move, although he was stretching his neck as far from the spider crawling up his torso as he could. Harry walked casually to Ron's side watching the creature's hairy legs work their way up Ron's chest, its three-inch long pincers clicking loudly back and forth.

"What's the matter, Ron," he said with a disinterested voice. "Don't tell me. Prefects don't like black spiders." Creeping ever so slowly, its front legs were finding footing at the base of Ron's neck. The spider's fur began to brush Ron's exposed chin. Ron began to whimper. Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at the spider, but then stopped and began to walk away. "But then, I wouldn't know. I'm just a pratty, know-it-all, glory seeker who wants nothing more than your prefect's badge."

"Harry!" Ron screamed.

"Your friend Goyle can handle things." Harry looked at Goyle who held his wand high as his eyes darted from one spider to another, but he was too petrified to move. "Can't you Goyle?" A long black point passed Ron's right eye as the spider's leg brushed across his face. Harry started to leave the boys' showers.

"Please," Ron whimpered nearly in tears. Harry spun and held his wand straight at Ron's face.

"Arania Exumai!" he whispered. A narrow beam of white light shot from his wand striking the spider squarely in the thorax. Either the spider, or Ron, (maybe both) gave a small screech as the creature

fell to the floor and shriveled into a ball. Goyle was still shaking as three other spiders began slowly advancing on him. Harry sighed.

"Goyle come here," Harry said walking over to the Slytherin. He held Goyle's arm up for him and said, "Snap your wrist down, and repeat the spell." Goyle's eyes glanced at Harry and then back to the closest spider. "Go on."

"A...Arania Exumai!" Goyle yelled. His wand erupted with a broad blast of white light and took out two spiders. "It worked! I... I don't believe it. I did it!"

"Excellent," Harry praised. Ron stared, white as a ghost and eyes wide as another spider made its way to him from the ceiling above. "Okay, now those two." While Goyle finished dispatching the other spiders, Harry sliced Ron from his bindings on the wall. As he was finally cut free, he began to fall and Harry caught him in his arms. Ron was shaking and could barely stand.

"Come on," Harry said. "Grab a towel and sit for a bit." The two left Goyle blasting at spiders in the shower. In the restroom, Harry stood against the wall while Ron leaned against a sink and looked in the mirror, pulling web out of his red hair. Harry couldn't help but stare at the scars on Ron's back. If they were getting better, he couldn't tell.

"I'll kill her," Ron breathed flicking a piece of web into the dustbin. "I was defenseless! I swear... I'll... I'll..."

"And who will we get to play Chaser?" Harry asked with a smile. Ron looked back to Harry and slowly smiled back. It was the first time Harry had felt any warmth at all toward his best friend in over six weeks. For a moment, there was silence and then Goyle yelled out he'd killed the last one.

"Well, get rid of them now and clean the place up!" Harry yelled back. Ron was struggling for something to say.

"You know, Harry," he said. "I didn't mean it." Ron went back to the mirror, but then looked at Harry. "I never meant any of it. I swear." The smile from Harry's face faded.

"You attacked him in his sleep, Ron," he said walking toward the redhead. "He was defenseless." Harry shook his head. "I don't care what the jab of the day is. You just don't get it. It's not about me. It's about us... ALL of us." Harry washed some of the webbing from off his hands into the adjacent sink. "You think it's just two roommates... that's all. But if two guys who were once good friends can't find peace with each other and work together against Voldemort, how will four separate houses join together? How will mudbloods, and half-bloods, and pure-bloods come together? How can wizards, and witches, and house elves, and goblins, and centaurs, and giants, and all the other sentient beings of the world rise together against this evil? You think it's only about two peas in a pod... black and white, rich and poor, strong and weak. Pick the difference Ron, we can always find a reason to hate."

Harry began to walk out the door, but as he started to leave he found Goyle standing at the entrance to the showers listening intently to his words. "Good job, Greg," said Harry, hitting Goyle firmly on the shoulder. The Slytherin smiled.

"Thanks," he said. As Harry started out to get his own towel, he passed James Cho on the way in.

"Harry, can I go?" he asked.

"Go where?" Harry returned.

"Tonight..." James said through gritted teeth as if Goyle shouldn't overhear. "You know." And then Harry remembered. Tonight was to be the first meeting for Dumbledore's Army.

"James," Harry said, "it's not a secret. Anyone can come, even if they're from Slytherin. I would think you, having been accepted by all four..."

"What?" Goyle asked. "What's goin' on?" Harry couldn't believe Goyle didn't know. Everyone was constantly stopping Harry in the hallway for details. In fact, so many students were inquiring that even

Hermione was worried they wouldn't all fit in the Room of Requirement.

"You were a member of the Inquisitorial Squad last year, Goyle," Harry said. The eagerness in Goyle's eyes dimmed, but Harry wasn't saying it to be mean. "You tried to grab us all coming out of the room. Do you know what we were doing?" Goyle's large eyebrows curled up forming a solid brow across his forehead. He shook his head no.

"Practicing," Harry said. "Preparing."

"Harry was teaching us Defense Against the Dark Arts when Umbridge wouldn't," Ron added. "He was fantastic." The eagerness in Goyle's eyes began to burn bright again. James kept looking back from Goyle to Harry. His expression was one of concern, as if telling this Slytherin anything, much less one who's father was a Death Eater, would lead to certain disaster.

"I wouldn't get too excited yet, Greg," Harry said in a very serious tone. "If you walk in the door, it means a commitment to support Albus Dumbledore and Hogwarts. It's a commitment to fight against Voldemort and his Death Eaters." Harry raised an eyebrow. The name of the Dark Lord made Goyle flinch much as it did Ron. James remained focused on Goyle's reaction. Goyle's face grew dark.

"I'm not my father, you know," he said in a slow deep voice. He slid down the wall and sat on the tiles of the bathroom floor. Even seated he was nearly as tall as James standing at his side. "My dad was always sniveling after Draco's dad. 'Lucius said this, Lucius said that.' Merlin it was disgusting." He let out a heavy sigh. "A year before I ever came to Hogwarts, my dad was telling me 'Be sure to look after Draco now Greg. He'll need your help.' Usin' me to suck up to Malfoy Manner. Well, look where it's got him," Goyle spat kicking a dustbin and flying it across the room into the sink next to Ron. Goyle stood up to put the dustbin back.

"I know I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed around here, right?" Nobody spoke. "But I can fly. If I can get through another year here, I have a decent shot at turnin' pro. I can make a little money on my own, and not have to go dippin' for hand outs," he sneered slapping

his hand against the wall with a large thud. "It's my only ticket out of hell, Potter. That's why you won't be gettin' a Bludger to the head week after next. We'll put Ravenclaw to shame, but don't go lookin' for any mercy when I'm wearin' green again," he said with a smile.

At the same moment, both Ron and Harry said, "We won't." As Harry walked out to get his things, he heard Goyle whisper to himself.

"I'm not my father."

That night, Harry and Hermione left early to the Room of Requirement. They paused when they got to the front door.

"Well," Hermione said before they entered, "it'll be a little cramped. Maybe we can work in shifts or something."

"It was a bit bigger for your party," Harry replied. "Let's have a look."

Hermione was first to enter and when she did she stopped in the doorway in front of Harry and gave out a little gasp. The sound seemed to echo as if she'd entered a large cavern.

"What is it?" Harry asked reaching for his wand. She moved in and Harry followed her. His jaw fell and his eyes went wide. "This is impossible," he murmured. The room was enormous. It was larger than the Great Hall itself. At the end near the entrance through which they'd just walked stood five rows of textbooks twenty-feet long all dealing with Defense Against the Dark Arts. Cushions lined the floors, but there were day-to-day items as well including statues, suits of armor, desks, and chairs. At the far end, the room turned into a small forest that resembled an outdoor setting much like Firenze's Divination class. Here were all the components Harry had thought of in the days leading up to their first meeting. He wondered how they could make the battles more realistic and less sterile. He knew not all the fights would be inside. The Room of Requirement was, once again, providing everything he could think of including what looked like a small street corner outside Hogsmeade.

"I was thinking about what Tonks has been teaching us," Harry said to Hermione who was just now recognizing the treasure in books at

her side. "You know, use the environment around us. I was picturing what those environments might be... and here they are." He shook his head in disbelief. "It'll be pretty silly... all this with only five people showing up."

"Come-on Harry," Hermione said, opening Defense Without a Wand. "We put up loads of posters, I'm sure people will show up. I already told you that most of Gryffindor said they were interested."

"Interested?" Harry snorted. "That doesn't mean they..." The door opened and in walked Luna Lovegood followed by about ten Ravenclaws.

"Hi Harry!" she said. She was completely un-phased by the change in the room, although it could hardly be called a room any more. "I saw you talking to Greg Goyle today at lunch. Are you becoming friends now?" Before Harry could answer, another group of about ten entered. Again they were mostly Ravenclaws, but James and Cho were both with them. Harry smiled at Cho as Anthony Goldstein walked up to him.

"Kind of expanding aren't you, Harry?" he asked, amazed at the sight before him.

"Listen, Anthony," Harry began, "you need to know..." but his words were cut short as more students arrived, this time from Hufflepuff. Within fifteen minutes, nearly a quarter of the school had filled the room. Hermione, Ginny and even Luna were trying to gather them together in some organized fashion. Harry was about to speak when Ron and Goyle walked in.

"What's he doing here?" Anthony yelled pointing at Goyle the only Slytherin in attendance. A few of the Ravenclaws began to jeer. Three of them pulled their wands and began to jog toward Goyle standing near the front door. Ron pulled his wand. The room was large and Harry was extremely far away when he raised his own wand.

"Immobulus!" he called in a loud and commanding voice. A yellow-white light shot out of his wand and struck the three, freezing them in

their tracks. The sheer distance, accuracy and power of the spell immediately gathered everyone's attention.

"Rule number one in Dumbledore's Army!" Harry called to them all. "We are here for one common goal... to defeat Voldemort and those who stand at his side." A murmur of agreement rippled through the large crowd. "We will never turn a wand in anger against those who would join us, whether in or OUT of this room! Ron, get them out of here." Ron cast a locomotion spell and soon had the three headed toward the door.

"Wait a second!" Anthony yelled. "You can't..."

"Rule number two!" Harry called out again. "I decide who stays and who goes. If there are those of you here who can't abide by these two rules, leave now." A few of the Ravenclaws cast glances to one another. Even Seamus seemed upset, but none left. Soon Ron re-entered shutting the door behind him and the first lesson began.

Those present were broken out into groups based on class year, not by house. Members of last year's DA began instructing a review of the basics they had all learned. Harry walked in and out of each group offering suggestions. But his greatest effect was on the morale of those he was near. In each instance, they seemed to focus better, or try harder. When he neared Cho he could see, needing to cast spells with her left hand, she had lost some of her skill from the year before. She was teaming with Anthony trying to show fourth years how to cast a hex-deflection charm.

"Here," said Harry, gently holding her hand. "You're trying to turn your wrist the wrong way. Spin it like this." And he softly twirled her wrist in the proper motion. "Come on Anthony, give it a go." Anthony held his wand up and cast a hex in their direction. Cho twisted her wand and spoke the incantation and a golden translucent shield appeared deflecting the hex up into the air. The fourth years cheered as Cho grinned.

"Super," said Harry with a smile and gently rubbing Cho's back. He lingered for a moment until Goldstein asked if they could get on with the lesson, and then sheepishly started for the next group. They'd

only been half an hour into it, but already Harry was feeling exhausted. There were far too many for him to help them all. He let out a deep sigh and started toward the group of seventh years when the door opened and in walked Tonks. Almost immediately everything stopped as they waited for the professor to send them packing.

Her look was different than that of the Tonks from Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Instead, she was wearing jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with the name of a band that Cho had earlier told Harry about, The Howling Heads. Her hair was black, jet black, and she certainly had an edgy look about her.

"Well, get on with it!" she called out smiling. "Let's see what you've all got!" A hundred grins returned hers and the students began where they left off. Tonks strode over to Harry and Hermione walked over to join the two of them.

"Hello, Professor," Hermione beamed. "It's nothing formal really. A few students thought it might be fun if..."

"Don't worry, Hermione," Tonks interrupted graciously. "You're not hurting my feelings. I know about last year, and I think it's great!" Tonks scanned the room. "By the way Hermione, I think your calculations might be correct. I'm two for two now."

"Really?" Hermione exclaimed, not really considering where she was. "If it works all the time, we'd have the upper hand then, wouldn't we?" Tonks smiled back but Harry was too busy watching the crowd to pay much attention. Ron, helping a second year with a wand movement, ducked just in time to avoid being hit in the back with a spell from a first year.

"Bit dangerous out there, wouldn't you say?" Tonks grimaced.

"Yeah," said Harry, puffing out his cheeks and releasing a long sigh. "I didn't dream there'd be this many people." Tonks smiled back at him.

"I did," she said with a grin. No sooner had the words left her mouth than Madame Guérir, one of the new healers at Hogwarts, walked

into the great chamber. Her eyes nearly popped out of her head as the door closed behind her. "Madame Guérir!" Tonks yelled. "Over here!" she called waving. Soon Tonks had explained the situation and Madame Guérir was running in and out of the various groups helping those who hadn't shielded properly or who were the victims of errant spells.

Tonks walked over to Goyle who was casting a tremendously strong stunning spell, but unable to hit the target. He'd already shattered one of the statues to pieces. "Greg," Tonks said in a very casual tone, "can I suggest something?" Goyle shrugged his shoulders and nodded. For some time Tonks worked with Goyle, until finally he started to hit his partner, Parvati, every time. Parvati was exceptional with her shielding charm; particularly having the advantage of knowing the spell was coming. Goyle's face began to light up. But no sooner had he smiled than he suddenly turned grim.

"Fighting the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters won't be this easy, Professor," Goyle said sending another streak of red light at Parvati.

"No, Greg," Tonks replied holding one hand to her chest, and rubbing the spot where she'd been hit last year. "No it won't."

After a while, it was clear that Goyle had mastered the skill. Tonks came back to speak with Harry and Hermione as Parvati sent red light Goyle's way.

"Hermione," Tonks started, "do you mind if I have a word with Harry?"

"Not at all," said Hermione. "I'll watch things from here. Go on."

"Harry?" Tonks asked. Harry followed Tonks to the far end of the chamber where the room began to turn to forest. Once they were under the foliage, the clamor and noise of the practicing students all but disappeared.

"How have you been?" Tonks asked with a gentle face, taking hold of Harry's right hand. "You haven't stayed after class for quite some time."

"Fine," Harry said simply. There was a faint rustle in the trees above them as if from an invisible wind. His answer was almost honest. Guilt about Cho had been gnawing at his insides. But there was something else, something he didn't understand himself.

"That doesn't seem too convincing, if you ask me," she replied. "How's Gabriella?"

"She's great." Then he sighed. "Everything in Little Whinging is perfect."

"I see. And Cho?" Tonks asked, drawing out the question for emphasis. "I've seen you two together around school quite a bit."

"She's getting better," Harry said, holding his gaze at the grass around his feet, but he could feel his face redden. Tonks held Harry's hand up closer to her.

"You need to tell them, Harry. You can't live a lie."

"I better get back," Harry said, but Tonks held his hand tight as he tried to leave.

"Wait," she insisted. "Tell me, Harry. You're teaching all these students to prepare for the battle. Who's preparing you?"

"I already know where my path lies, Tonks," Harry whispered back watching the leaves in the trees rustle.

"I know you're great with a wand, Harry. But if you could change your appearance at will, it would be a huge advantage." Reluctantly, Harry nodded his head. Tonks smiled.

"Have you practiced any more?" she asked.

"Not really," Harry replied glancing back at the students on the far end of the chamber.

"Come with me," said Tonks, pulling Harry deeper into the woods. Soon they were out of sight and Tonks took both his hands in hers.

“Okay, think of someone you know. Someone you’re very familiar with. Pick someone about your own size and build. Can you think of anyone?” For a moment Harry hesitated. Thoughts of Ron and Seamus flashed into his mind... even Neville now that he was thinner. Finally he locked on the face and nodded his head with his eyes closed. “Start at the top of your head and work down. Think about their hair, their face, how they stand. Try to become that person.”

In the darkness, under the rustle of leaves, Harry’s hair began to straighten, falling only a bit further down his shoulders. His nose narrowed and his eyebrows lightened. His chin began to protrude ever so slightly as his own cleft disappeared. It took all of about three minutes with Tonks prodding suggestions along the way, especially once she realized who he had picked. Finally, he was done and opened his eyes to look at her.

“Well?” he asked nervously, not sure himself why he had chosen this form above all the others.

“You’ve done this before Harry,” she answered with a questioning smile. “I can tell.”

“Well... never him,” Harry said. “Am I close?”

Tonks leaned in gently holding his narrow face in her hands, and stroking his long blonde hair. “Almost,” she said approvingly, holding his hands again. “Just one problem; you have green eyes, Draco.”

Chapter 29 - Lost at Sea

The day was crystal clear and cold as Harry made his way back to the castle after Care of Magical Creatures. A few yards ahead walked Ron flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. During the last few lessons, the three had banded together. To the betterment of Crabbe Harry hoped, but doubted. The day was easily the coldest of the year and, as a slight breeze blew, everyone pulled their cloaks up tighter to their ears. Harry watched as the three climbed the front steps to the castle, and as his eyes tracked further up they caught sight of Hermione standing next to Cho. A few steps later, Ron met Hermione and the two began to talk. Ron shook his head casting a backward glance at Harry. Hermione went into the castle with him. Cho, however, still using her locomotion spell to travel, waited for Harry to meet her.

"Hi, Harry," Cho said cheerfully. "You're free next period right? She, quite naturally, took his right hand in her left as they entered the castle.

"Yeah," said Harry, looking back at Cho who wore a sly smile. "Why?"

"Professor Flitwick is preparing for the Halloween Feast tonight and said he could use some help. Want to give it a go?"

Since last week's DA meeting and Tonks' comments, Harry had been desperately searching for a way to tell Cho about Gabriella, but still he had been unable to muster the right words. Perhaps it was the part of his heart that didn't want to hurt her feelings, but more likely it was the part of his heart that wanted to have her for himself. Every time he opened his mouth to tell her something inside began to boil. "No," his thoughts would say, strangling his tongue. "She's mine. They're both mine." And then he would feel the warm embers of a jealous rage begin to kindle. With increasing difficulty, he would turn his thoughts to cool the embers, but seemed to be growing less able to get the words out before the opportunity to reveal the truth passed. And now, given the chance to spend more time with Cho, he could once again feel his heart begin to pound with excitement.

"Yes," he said grinning, although he could hear his mind saying no. "Er, right now?"

"I'm ready if you are," she said with a beaming smile that inferred more meaning in her words, and she held his arm more tightly in hers. Together they entered the Great Hall.

Professor Flitwick was busy levitating the various pumpkins toward the ceiling. Their carved faces were ghastly, their glowing red eyes sinister, eyes that Harry had seen before. He shivered.

"You're cold," Cho said rubbing his arm. "It was quite cold out there, wasn't it?" Harry nodded in agreement. Professor Flitwick had finished levitating the last pumpkin when he noticed the two before him.

"Ah! Mr. Potter! Ms. Chang!" he squeaked out. "What a delightful surprise to see you both. You're quite early, as you can see. I still have much to do. Perhaps in an hour or two you might..."

"We're here to give you a hand Professor," Cho interrupted. Professor Flitwick seemed somewhat taken aback by the offer.

"Well, that's wonderful. I... let's see... I've never had anyone offer to help before." Harry cast Cho a steely glance, but she just smiled back. "Perhaps you could start lighting the Jack-O-Lanterns. A small, non-extinguishing, fire charm should work." Harry just look confused, but Cho nodded.

"Certainly sir," she replied. She pointed her wand to a pumpkin over her head and called, "Incendi-Permentia!" Instantly the face began to glow. She looked over to Harry who still looked confused. "Focus on the fire burning inside the pumpkin. The first time I tried this, the whole pumpkin went up in a great blaze that wouldn't stop burning."

Soon, the two began the pumpkin lighting. They also helped animate some of them to wink, or bite. Against the wall near the Gryffindor table, Harry suggested to Professor Flitwick that they put some sort of spider display. The whole wall was one large spider web crawling with black furry spiders the size of poodles. To Harry's disappointment, Cho placed a containment charm so that they couldn't escape. The other wall held a mural of pirates. At least, they

once were pirates, but now were nothing more than rags and bone. The skeletons reenacted a brutal beheading of one of their member caught trying to pilfer from their treasure chest. A dense fog covered the floor so that only the tops of the benches could be seen, and Professor Flitwick enchanted a hundred feathers to fly beneath the haze and rub against the ankles of the unsuspecting.

“Well,” Professor Flitwick said grinning after they’d placed a few more tricks and treats, “I think that should do the trick.” He slid his wand into his robes and rubbed his hands together. “The feast should start in a little under an hour. Thanks so much for your help. I must remember to ask you both to help next year.” Cho grinned, but the smile that Harry had been wearing after their afternoon’s accomplishments fell instantly, his mind locking on the doubt of ever seeing next year alive.

“You’re welcome, Professor,” Cho said not noticing Harry’s expression at her side. Professor Flitwick noticed, however, and he walked over to Harry, the fog rising to his waist.

“Mark my words Mr. Potter,” he said with firm confidence. “One year from today, you’ll be sipping pumpkin juice and smiling about the clever tricks you planted for your fellow students.” Professor Flitwick looked into Harry’s green eyes with a gentle smile, and inside Harry warmed and smiled back. For that moment at least, he thought there might be a next year. “I’m off to get ready; don’t dally too long,” said Professor Flitwick with a wink, and he left the Great Hall.

Save for the spiders, pumpkins, rustling feathers, black cats and screaming pirates, the two were alone for the first time in weeks. Cho moved closer to Harry, putting her hand to his face. Again Harry’s heart began to pound and he could feel the scar on his arm prickle. He could easily see what her brown eyes were telling him. He reached up to bring her hand down. It was time he told her everything. But, when he touched her left hand with his right, all logic seemed to fade. Instead of taking her hand away, he pulled her close and kissed her.

A few students had already entered for the feast when the two came out of the anti-chamber behind the teacher’s table off the Great Hall.

The only professor present was Tonks, who was busy reading a book and drinking pumpkin juice. The two slipped around to the Gryffindor table backed by spiders.

"I... I better go get ready," said Harry, suddenly uncomfortable. Cho nodded and kissed him goodbye. He started to leave when she remembered.

"You're going to Hogsmeade tomorrow, aren't you?" Distracted with churning thoughts, Harry nodded. "Shall we go..." Harry's eyes grew large as the dawning comprehension hit him.

"No," he whispered. "No... I can't go." His mouth hung open and he kicked at a feather hidden beneath the fog tickling his ankle.

"Why not?" Cho asked a bit too heatedly. "I thought..."

"I don't have permission," he groaned. "I don't believe it. I don't have permission." He slammed his hand against the wall, smashing a spider and spraying green ooze all over his arm. He stormed out of the Great Hall.

"Harry, wait!" Cho called, following him out.

"Look Cho," Harry snapped, as he headed toward the staircases. "I don't want to talk right now, okay? I don't have permission so, NO, I'm not going to Hogsmeade tomorrow. My parents are dead. My godfather is dead. I DON'T HAVE BLOODY PERMISSION!" He began to run up the stairs as students heading to the feast gawked.

As he blasted by Gryffindors headed the other way, he passed Hermione who grabbed him by the arm.

"Harry, where are you going?" she asked. He grabbed her hand by the wrist. Anger was raging in his veins, a foreign anger that was building from within. All he saw was red.

"Where am I going?" he replied. "WHERE AM I GOING?" He began to push her against the wall.

“Stop it!” she cried. “You’re hurting me!” Her words pierced his rage, and instantly he released her arm and stared at her backing away. He began to breathe hard, his heart racing. He looked from his hands to her eyes. His face was in agony.

“I... I’m sorry,” he whispered hoarsely. He turned and ran, not stopping until he was seated on his own bed. He looked down at his right arm pulling up the sleeve. The scar was red and raised. “What’s going on?” he whispered. There was a squeak in the floorboards to his right, and he began to reach for his wand just as Neville walked in from the showers.

“Hey, Harry!” he called primping the collar on his shirt. “Better get goin’, we’re both gonna’ be late.” Harry pulled his sleeve down and leaned back on his bed.

“I’m not feeling too well Neville,” Harry moaned. “I think I’ll stay in tonight.”

“That’s a shame,” Neville said. “It’s always fun, but this year promises to be the best.” Neville slipped a reddish-yellow flower from a vase and turned to Harry. “For Helen.” Neville winked and left the room.

Harry took a deep breath and tried to find true north again. With each passing day, he felt like he was losing more control. He was starting to believe that Voldemort had left more than a Dark Mark behind from last year’s encounter. “Dobby, where are you?” he whispered to himself.

Only the cold wind blowing against his window answered his words. He closed his eyes to clear his mind, to sleep. He began to smile thinking of Cho, when there was a rap at the window. Harry turned to see Hedwig hovering outside. She pecked once again at the glass. Quickly he went to let her in. As he opened the window, a cold gust of wind blew in pushing him backward and sending shivers down his spine. Hedwig landed in her cage and took a drink of water. A letter was tied to her leg. The smile on Harry’s face fell, and then began anew only to fall once more. He was riding on waves of emotion, rising and falling, rising and falling, with no land in sight. Hesitantly,

he took the letter from the white owl's leg, sat down on his bed and began to read in the soft glow of candlelight.

Harry my love,

Tonight is my first time celebrating Halloween in England. Mama says it's quite different than the way we normally celebrate the feast. Many on Privet Drive have gone all out decorating their homes. Except, of course, your aunt and uncle. The front of Duncan's house is covered with skeletons and spiders. Emma and I helped him carve pumpkins last night. What a mess! Emma was almost giddy slicing away, but I must say I think mine was the best. I wish so that you could have been here to help us decorate. I miss you, and can't wait for Christmas. I've already told Mama that we can't prepare anything until you arrive. I want you to see first hand how we celebrate in our family. It's fantastic!

Dudley said to pass on to you that his parents have already been talking about celebrating the holiday with his Aunt Marge. I must say that over the last few weeks, he's become almost sweet. He still smokes, which I hate, but at school everyone talks about the change that's come over him this year. I can't believe he was ever that horrible.

Mama's slowly improving, although she still seems to forget things now and then. She keeps checking to make sure she locked the front door, over and over. As for me, I've finally caught up at school, and I'm starting to grow accustomed to Stonewall. I'm just not sure that's a good thing. I've also started helping Duncan with his classes. He told me the other day that he's glad he stuck it out to graduate. I think we spend most of our time talking about you, Harry.

I know you're doing well at school. I only hope you miss me as much as I miss you. I'm keeping my little box with your heart warm in my room. It's waiting for you when you come home. Do write back soon. Your last letter took far too long. I began to worry.

Have I ever told you that I love you?

Gabriella

Holding the note in both hands and reading it for the third time, the paper began to tremble. He wanted to leave now, to be at her side, to hold her tight to him. He walked over to the window and looked out at the clear sky, placing his hand flat against the cold glass. The stars were bright, and the moon that was full last week still lit the grounds below. But then, why was Dudley being so sweet? And why was she spending so much time with Duncan? A pang of jealousy began to creep into his veins. With difficulty, he pushed it aside and flopped back onto his bed. He forced himself to focus on relaxing.

“Occlumency,” he hissed. “What a joke.” The ocean of his emotions was beginning to form white caps. He tried to picture the waters calm and still. The evening following Cho’s kiss and Gabriella’s “I love you.” were crashing against the walls of his skull. It wasn’t peace that pushed him to sleep, but exhaustion.

The fog billowed about his ankles as spiders crawled against the wall. He was carrying Cho in his arms to a large chintz chair. The fire was hot as he removed his shirt. He looked to the chair, but Cho was gone. He sat down and fully faced the fire. There was only the crackle of the fire and the sound of slithering around his feet. There was so much to get ready for... so many plans. A voice called his name and he stood in anticipation; he held his wand close wondering what the answer would be.

“She has granted your wish my Lord,” the cloaked figure said on one knee. Harry’s bony fingers loosened their grip on his wand. He began to laugh in a high cold screech. Suddenly, a blast of pain hit him in the forehead and everything went black. His brain was on fire, and he began to scream. Pain, as if he were being stabbed by a thousand knives, shot up and down his arm and he screamed harder.

Harry woke to Ron shaking him about the shoulders. Harry was confused. It was morning, but he’d only just closed his eyes. His bed was wet from perspiration, but he felt chilled. He began to shake uncontrollably. Everyone was up staring at him from their beds.

“Harry,” Ron said letting go of his shoulders, “you were screaming. Is it...?”

This time Harry nodded rubbing his forehead. Dean and Neville had already left for the morning, and Goyle had just returned from the shower. A look of panic spread across the Slytherin's face.

"The mark!" Goyle gasped. "It's the same mark!" Harry's shirt was off and his bare arm revealed the red scar of the sword and snake. Harry was too shaken to attempt any effort to hide it.

"Greg," said Ron sternly, "what goes on in Gryffindor, stays in Gryffindor. We agreed, right?"

"But he... Malfoy... he's got the same..."

"We agreed, RIGHT?" Ron snapped back. Goyle, ashen faced, reluctantly nodded his head. Ron turned back to Harry. "Is someone being hurt? Did you see?"

"It's too late, Ron." Harry whispered, half dazed. "Whatever it is, we're too late."

At breakfast he sat with Hermione and Ron, and spoke only of the cloaked figure in his dream.

"It's a woman," Harry said softly. What he didn't say is that, as Voldemort, he felt there was some sort of attraction at play.

"You've got to tell Dumbledore," Hermione said. "You know you do." At first, Harry began to argue, but a second later he stood from his chair and walked over to Dumbledore seated at the head table. Moments after he relayed the story, Dumbledore stood from his chair and patted Harry on the shoulder. Then, he walked over to Tonks who began to follow him out of the Great Hall. As she passed Harry, she put her hand to his face.

"Don't worry," she whispered. She gave him a wink and smiled. "We'll see what's up." As she left the Great Hall behind Dumbledore, Harry looked back at the tables. Already students were beginning to depart for Hogsmeade. He walked back to his seat.

“What did he say?” Ron asked when Harry returned.

“He said if it had already been done, he would have heard by now,” Harry replied. “He’s gone to warn the Order.”

“Do you think it’s another attack on Hogsmeade?” Hermione whispered. Harry shrugged his shoulders.

“Seems logical enough with the students out and all.”

“You shouldn’t go, Harry,” Hermione said holding his hand. “You should stay here.” Harry jerked his hand away.

“I can’t go, Hermione. I HAVE to stay here,” he spat. “I don’t have a signed permission slip.” The words were loud enough to carry and Goyle caught them in his ears.

“You’re not the only one staying,” said Goyle with satisfaction. “Draco won’t be going either. They say he’s lost his nerve for Hogsmeade. You know, after the Dementors and all.” He stabbed another sausage with his fork.

“You could ask...” Hermione began, but then realized that Dumbledore had already left the Great Hall. “Well... what about Professor McGonagall?” Harry just rolled his eyes. What little appetite he had, evaporated.

“You guys have fun, but be careful, okay?” Harry said pushing his plate forward. “I’m finished,” he whispered and his plate and cup vanished.

Cho caught Harry on his way out of the Great Hall. Together they walked to the castle entrance where students were already lining up to leave for Hogsmeade. Mr. Filch was marking them off one-by-one. Filch saw Harry, and a truly vicious grin creased his face. He knew Harry didn’t have permission. Cho took Harry’s hand.

“I’ll stay Harry,” she offered, smiling as best she could. “We can find other things to do.” She was beautiful, Harry thought. Her brown eyes were large and he had a vision of the two of them flying on their

broomsticks with her short black hair whistling in the wind. But a deeper voice inside turned his thoughts toward Little Whinging.

"Erm, no," he said, clearing his throat. "No. You go have a good time. I'm way behind on all my homework. I haven't even started on my star charts, and I don't a clue where to find gillyweed." Cho rubbed his shoulder.

"I won't stay too long," she said. "Maybe I can get back early and we can go over your homework. By the way," she said with a smile, "gillyweed is found on the North Shore." Cho got in line, and as Harry started up the stairs, Anthony Goldstein walked over and stood in line next to her. Cho looked up to Harry and waved. Anthony looked up to see what she was looking at and quickly turned back to Cho.

In the Gryffindor common room, Harry sat on the couch and watched the fire. He could take the invisibility cloak, but it was getting too small to cover him properly. He'd have to hunch around the whole time. He was determined to find a way to get to Hogsmeade, the need growing in his mind. Finally, a challenge was put before him. But how? Unable to come up with any reasonable ideas, he sighed and decided to head to the library to see if Cho was right about the North Shore.

When he arrived he found Malfoy sitting at one of the tables with a few first and second years scattered about. A large book was open before him, but he was staring straight ahead into space. Harry walked over to him.

"What's up Draco?" Harry asked kindly. He was unable to find it in himself, for some reason, to be snide. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"Merlin's beard! Potter," he drawled. "I see enough of you in class. Can't you just leave me alone?" he snapped. His sneering words were tinged with a sadness that Harry knew all too well.

"I just thought..."

"Well you thought wrong!" Draco yelled. He snapped his book closed and laid it on the table, and then he paused for a moment looking at Harry. "You..." he began in a softer voice, but then he shook his head,

stood and left the library. Harry watched him leave and glanced back to the book Malfoy had not been reading... A History of Horrors in Azkaban. On the cover, a picture of a Dementor floated in and out of frame. Harry began to feel cold, and turned the book face down. He leaned on the table and noticed Malfoy had left his cloak on the back of the seat where he sat. Against the green wool lay a glistening strand of blonde hair. He held it up and stroked the long strand between his fingers. And then it came to him. Quickly, he left the library and soon found himself in the tunnel below the one-eyed witch.

With the cloak about his shoulders and the golden strand still in his fingers, he closed his eyes and began to concentrate. This time he was thinking gray, not green. A few moments later, the transformation was complete. He was an exact duplicate of Draco Malfoy. He glanced down the tunnel and everything was blurry. Realizing his error, he reached up and took off his glasses slipping them inside his pocket.

Once inside Honeydukes, he started up the stairs from the cellar. The candy-shop was packed. Nobody paid any attention that Draco Malfoy had entered the room from an unusual entrance. He scanned the shop and started to move forward to the front counter. An interesting thing happened. Normally, Harry would be pushing and shoving his way through the throng apologizing at every step of the way. Instead, as he moved forward, the crowd parted. Everyone moved out of his way without him saying a word. At the counter the proprietor, Mr. Dulcis bowed his head.

"Master Malfoy," he said, "a pleasure as always to serve you." He bowed again. "What will you have?" Harry made a selection of various candies. The choices seemed to confuse Mr. Dulcis. Harry pulled out a gold galleon and told him to keep the change. His eyes widened in amazement. Again as Harry turned to go, the crowd parted. Only Toby Vilis, a sixth year Slytherin stepped in front of him and patted him on the back.

"I told 'em you'd be here, Malfoy," Vilis sneered. "You're not afraid a nothin'!" Something about the way Vilis was in his way, or how he touched him upset Harry. He suddenly felt quite angry and evidently

the anger showed on his face. Immediately his fellow Slytherin dropped his eyes and backed away apologizing.

It was strange to be so respected. Harry stood a little taller in his new body and walked out the door. The moment he was outside he was tackled from the side and nearly fell to the ground. He began to reach for his wand, but hesitated knowing that it would give him away. In the same instant, Pansy Parkinson's voice hissed in his ear.

"You lying dog," she whispered. "Not feeling well. Hah! What a joke. Didn't think I'd find you did you." She bit down on his neck. "Word travels fast in Hogsmeade darling." She looked up into Harry's eyes. Harry was at a loss for what to say. He'd practiced his voice on the shopkeeper, but Pansy would know in an instant if something were wrong. And, by the look in her eyes, she already had.

"What's the matter?" she asked. Harry straightened getting to his feet and held her aside.

"I...I told you," he said hoarsely. "I'm not feeling well. I just thought it'd look bad if I didn't show up... you know." He was hoping she'd know, because he sure didn't.

"So true darling. So true," Pansy said taking one finger to Harry's face and scratching along his scar with her finger.

"Have you seen Potter?" Harry asked just trying to see the reaction. Pansy sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Is he all you can talk about anymore?" she asked exasperated. "Every day it's Potter this and Potter that." She took in a deep breath and exhaled. "Can you just go ten minutes without bringing up that half-blood's name?" Harry was silent thinking about what she meant. Pansy needed to fill the silence with her own words.

"I know Goyle's been getting chummy with those curseable Gryffindors, but where's Crabbe?" she asked, scanning the streets. Finally, Harry put on the best scowl he could.

"I don't know," he croaked. "But there'll be hell to pay for dodging me." Pansy actually looked a bit frightened.

"I believe he thought you..."

"Crabbe and thought don't belong in the same sentence," Harry drawled with more confidence. "Go find him and tell him to meet me at the Hog's Head in half an hour, or you'll both regret the day we met." Pansy scanned the streets.

"S-Sure, Draco," she stammered. "N-No problem." And she ran off down the street and around the corner.

"Finally," Harry whispered to himself. He reached up and rubbed his eyes and felt the scar on the left side of his face. It was slightly raised, but he felt no pain when he pressed against it. An elderly wizard passed by noticing the mark. His eyes opened wide and he stared taking two more steps and running into a witch headed the other way. "Exactly," Harry thought.

A flash of red caught the corner of Harry's eye, and he turned to see Goyle and Ron walking his way toward Honeydukes. A mischievous smile crossed his face as he stood his ground. A moment later the two were nearly upon him when they noticed he was there.

"Draco," Goyle choked in surprise, "you're here." He took a half step away from Ron.

"Always so brilliant, Goyle -- a true Merlin among men. You thought otherwise?" Harry drawled in his best Malfoy voice yet. And then turning to Ron he sneered, "Hello, Weasles."

"A bit brave being out all alone, aren't you?" Ron spat back. "Wouldn't want to be kissed by a Dementor, or something worse like Parkinson." Harry turned his attention to Goyle.

"I heard you were at a DA meeting Goyle," Harry slithered between his teeth. Goyle shot a nervous glance to Ron and took another half step away. "That would be Dumbledore's Army, wouldn't it?"

Suddenly Harry had the feeling that an intruder was entering his mind. A picture of Tonks flashed in front of his face, but Harry quickly turned the invasion away as Ron groaned and held his hand to his head.

“Just trying to get some practice in,” Goyle sputtered. “That’s all Draco, really.”

“I see,” Harry said snidely. “You are still a Slytherin, aren’t you Goyle?”

“Don’t you have better things to do with your time, Draco?” Ron snapped. “I know we do! Come on Goyle.” He started to step away.

“Where’s your precious Potter, Weasles?” Harry drawled again. “Hiding in his bed at Hogwarts again?” Ron turned on Harry and drew his wand.

“Say another word about Harry, and I’ll turn you into an oozing ball of jelly again Malfoy.” Ron stepped closer. “He’s got more bravery in his little finger than you have in that big fat head of yours.”

“It’s good to see someone who knows how to be loyal,” answered Harry, and he turned and walked away, his forehead starting to ache.

A short walk later, he found himself in front of Madam Puddifoot's. “I wonder,” he whispered to himself. He opened the door and walked in. The place was packed, decorated to the gills with miniature Halloween creatures throwing orange and black confetti on to the patrons. In the back sat Cho at a table with Anthony Goldstein. For a moment he felt his insides begin to churn. A flash of anger filled his eyes. Suddenly, Harry’s forehead, where his scar would be, began to burn. He winced and rubbed his brow leaning against a counter. The room came in and out of focus. He took a deep breath as the pain ebbed away, and a sudden sense of euphoria replaced the rage. In Madam Puddifoot's were many students from all four of Hogwarts’ houses. Conversation filled the room. A thought crossed his mind, an opportunity for unity.

“Excuse me everyone!” Harry called. A few students looked his way. “Excuse me!” he yelled out louder. The room fell silent. Anthony

Goldstein made to stand, but Cho grabbed his hand and he sat back down. Harry began, "At the start of the school year on the Hogwarts Express I nearly killed Cho Chang." There was a murmur in the shop. A few Slytherins grinned. "I was angry at her for getting in the way of one of my far too frequent spats with Harry Potter. She sits here before you, harmed by what my senseless rage did to her, and I wish to take this moment to offer her a public apology." A few students looked over to Cho who had straightened in her chair, still holding Anthony's hand. The Slytherins were confused. "Cho, Anthony, all of Hogwarts, I am sincerely sorry for what I did on that train. I promise you... the next time we find ourselves together on the Hogwarts Express, it will be a very different ride indeed!" Harry walked over and took a glass of water from off one of the nearest tables and raised it in the air. "To Hogwarts!" he called. More than half returned the toast, including Cho, and even a couple Slytherins.

He set the glass down grinning at what had just happened. "Progress," he thought to himself. Cho stood and started to walk towards him when, screeching like the old train's brakes, a loud siren split the air. It reminded him of a World War II air-raid siren, and the sound sent shivers down his spine. Suddenly a voice filled the shop.

"All Hogwarts students are to return to the school immediately!" It was the voice of Professor McGonagall. The sirens continued to blare as students emptied the various shops and businesses. "All Hogwarts students shall proceed as quickly as possible to the school," she repeated. And then a man's voice echoed through the street. "Residents of Hogsmeade prepare to defend yourselves." At his words, a woman standing at the corner began to scream uncontrollably until two men helped her inside the inn. The pace of the students quickened as various professors who had also been visiting joined them. One stood high above the rest.

"Now don' anyone panic!" Hagrid yelled out. "Follow me, an' no one 'ill get hurt." He was an instant magnet as everyone drew close. Harry found himself swept up in the crowd unable to get back to Honeydukes. He was in a group of Slytherins as they hurriedly made their way toward the castle.

"What happened?" one of them asked panicky.

"Kings Cross," one yelled in the commotion. "It's been blown to bits."

"What?" Harry yelled.

"How did you know Draco?" another asked his eyes more frightened of Harry than of what had just happened.

"Know what?" Harry replied.

"The Hogwarts Express... in Puddifoot's you swore it'd be a very different ride. You... you knew!"

"But how?" Toby Vilis called out, coming to some internal realization that Draco was truly in league with the Dark Lord's actions. "How did you know they'd blow all of 9-¾'s?" Harry stared unable to speak.

"He knew?" another Slytherin asked. He turned to Harry and patted him on the back saying, "You're brilliant Draco! You really had me goin' in Puddifoot's! Absolutely brilliant... a different ride!" He began to laugh, but Harry began to shiver. "They'll need a whole bloody new train!" And the entire group of Slytherins started laughing, patting Harry about the shoulders.

Harry lowered his head and rubbed his brow. "What have I done," he whispered to himself. In that instant, the hope of unity he had felt five minutes before faded into darkness.

Chapter 30 - The Stone of Cinnabar

All indications point to Voldemort's Death Eaters being behind the horrific attack yesterday at King's Cross Station. Nearly 30 Muggles and 12 wizards died in the blast that occurred at just after 11 am. Many more were injured. The Director for Wizarding Security, Arthur Weasley, stated that two suspects were being held in connection with the attack, although he refused to provide their names. "The two sorcerers in our custody are providing valuable information, which promises improved security for both wizards and Muggles alike.

Mrs. Alisa Clarke, Director of Magical Mischief, disagrees. "How anyone can think 42 dead is an improvement is beyond me. We need to go on the offensive before we're all killed!" Indeed the Ministry of Magic has been flooded with complaints, many calling for the resignation of Director Weasley. The Dailey Prophet has it on good authority that Weasley's office had word of the impending attack hours before, but still was unable to prevent its dire consequences.

The Minister of Transportation, Pushem Longer, stated that repairs are already underway. "Muggles believe it was another Mid-East terrorist attack, although the head of government has been contacted by Minister Fudge with our suspicions. Charms are still in place to prevent the various magical tracks from being discovered. Platform 9-3/4's will be rebuilt in time for the Christmas holiday."

Among the dead, Engineer Thaddeus Fleming, is credited with saving the lives of countless children as they disembarked after their return from a morning sightseeing trip to Hogsmeade. Fleming used a shield charm protecting the children from falling debris as he ushered them into a shelter. The shield charm failed just before he entered the chamber himself, and he was struck and killed by a falling beam.

"I know him," Harry exclaimed. "On our first night, he helped Hagrid with the first years when everything went crazy in Hogsmeade." His

hand began to shake as he took a sip of tea. James Chang laid the paper down revealing a picture of the Hogwarts Express in flames.

"It's awful," he said with a grimace. "It goes on -- just more about who died and who was hurt. What if we'd been on the train coming back from school?" The thought sent a slight shiver down his spine.

Harry took another halfhearted bite of egg and glanced back to the entrance of the Great Hall. He'd been sitting with James and the Creevey brothers throughout breakfast, and still there was no sign of Ron or Hermione. When he woke to find Ron's bed empty, he assumed he'd find them both eating. He asked Goyle about Ron, but Goyle either didn't know, or was silent.

"Don't worry James," Dennis said reassuringly. "They've got who did it, and they'll be sure it won't happen again."

"Maybe, Dennis," replied James, unsure. "It's just... not knowing."

"That's what he wants," Harry spoke up. "Fear. Fear of what will happen next." He pointed his fork at Neville and the row of Gryffindors that had been reading over James' shoulder. "He'll try to use that against us. Don't let him."

A sliver of sunshine split the gray ceiling of the Great Hall as Goyle leaned in to the conversation. "I hear Draco knew it was going to happen before it did," he whispered looking back over his shoulder. "He used some lame excuse to apologize to Cho so he could show off he's connected, if you know what I mean." James looked at Harry, and Harry began to rub his head. James leaned in himself.

"I knew it!" he hissed. "He's as foul as his..."

"No he's not!" Harry said abruptly. "All he said was..."

"You weren't even there Harry," Colin interrupted. "Some snakes can't be saved. I know you two have been..."

"We haven't been anything!" Harry yelled now turning heads in the Great Hall. He even caught Professor McGonagall's attention. She

was acting Head Mistress, sitting in for Professor Dumbledore as neither he nor Tonks had been seen since the day before. Harry stood. Colin started to say something again, but Dennis grabbed his arm and shook his head.

Standing, Harry looked around the hall. The whole place was in whispers; everyone was frightened, unsure. There was no grand speech from Professor Dumbledore like the morning after the Hogsmeade attack. There was no rallying cry to bring confidence to the school. Harry scoured the hall for Ron and Hermione, but they were still nowhere to be seen. The few Professors at the head table with an appetite to attempt breakfasting were grim and stoic.

"I did this," Harry whispered to himself.

"You did what?" Colin asked with a much calmer tone. Abruptly, Harry stood on the Gryffindor table and held his wand toward the gray sky above.

"Candeo!" he called as fireworks shot out of his wand toward the ceiling. Everyone gasped in surprise.

"Mr. Potter..." Professor McGonagall started quietly, but Harry ignored her and spoke his mind, his heart.

"Students of Hogwarts!" he yelled. As all the faces in the Great Hall turned his way, Harry felt himself stand somehow taller. "They attacked Hogsmeade, and Professor Dumbledore told us, didn't he? We will defeat this evil... We will deny his goals! But what, instead, are you doing?" He turned at a group of Hufflepuffs grouped over the cover shot on the Daily Prophet. "Huddling together in fear?" He turned to a large group of Slytherins who had surrounded Malfoy who was clearly at a loss. "The Slytherins think Draco Malfoy's public apology to Cho Chang was some kind of ruse to prove he knew the attack was imminent." He turned to the Ravenclaws who were muttering in agreement. "And so would you conspire and seek vengeance?" He looked back to his own table. "Dumbledore said that by staying true to the principals this school was founded on WE would lead the charge." He looked up to the head table. Surprisingly, Professor McGonagall had retaken her seat. "We cannot defeat his

evil with fear. We cannot defeat his evil with anger.” Crabbe let out a snort that turned the heads of those around him. A number of Slytherins smiled, but Malfoy stared at Harry unblinking.

Harry pointed his wand straight at Malfoy. The student’s around him scattered but Malfoy sat unflinching. “I assure you,” Harry called out advancing on Malfoy. “There is only one among us who hears Voldemort’s thoughts.” Then dropping his aim from Malfoy to the table in front of him Harry called, “Serpentortia!” A large venomous cobra sprang from the tip of Harry’s wand and landed in front of Malfoy. There were screams everywhere, and Professors from the head table began to move toward Harry and Malfoy at the other end of the Great Hall. Harry slipped his wand in his robes as the snake raised to strike Malfoy. Still he sat unflinching. Harry narrowed his eyes and began to speak.

“Hasheth-Hayahess. Hasheth-Hayaheth.” The snake turned toward Harry flicking its tongue. “Hasha-sayeth. Sayeth.” Slowly, Harry reached down and lifted the snake into his arms. There was a collective gasp as everyone froze, including Professor Flitwick who had nearly made his way down to stop the activities. Harry began to smile stroking the snake’s head.

“Draco’s father is in Azkaban, but that doesn’t make him a Death Eater.” Harry held the snake higher so that everyone could see. “Can we learn to embrace that which is different? Can we find ways to accept apologies for past mistakes?” There was a general murmur of support, but still Malfoy said nothing. “Can we join together to fight this evil?” Scattered applause broke out even at the Slytherin table. Harry placed the snake back on the table, flicked his wand, and it was gone. “Then join us Slytherin! Join Dumbledore’s Army today after lunch. Together we can win. Together we WILL win!” The room cheered and even the professors began to clap.

In the applause, Harry looked to Malfoy whose face had not flinched and whose gray eyes had been fixed on Harry the entire time. For a moment they were frozen in time as Malfoy, ever so slightly, ever so slowly, shook his head no. No one else noticed, but Harry understood and, nodding his own head, he returned to the Gryffindor table. When he sat back down, Colin was grinning.

“Brilliant, Harry,” he whispered grabbing Harry’s right arm. Harry realized that it didn’t hurt, and a quick feel of his thumb to his forearm confirmed the scar, for the first time in weeks, had again faded away. For some time they sat eating in silence. Ginny came over and asked for the paper.

“Is it true?” she asked. “Are they saying it’s Dad’s fault?”

“Oh, Ginny,” Dennis replied handing her the Daily Prophet, “it’s nothing. When you’re in a position of authority, someone always thinks they know better.”

“I know, but he takes criticism so badly. I know he’s...”

“Mr. Potter!” Professor McGonagall called having stepped to the side of the head table. Dennis and Ginny continued to chat as Harry made his way up to speak with his head of house. She was looking at him over the top of her glasses. “Come with me,” she said and together they exited to the small chamber where he had had desert with Dumbledore. When the door closed behind them, a small smile appeared on her face.

“Professor Dumbledore sent message that he and Professor Tonks would be delayed,” she said. Even with the small smile, Harry could tell that she was worried. “He knew that there would be concern among the students, but asked that I say nothing of the incident until after lunch today.” Her smile broadened. “His hope was that a student, or two, might take it upon themselves to initiate discussion. Once again, he was correct.” She removed her glasses and walked toward the fireplace. “He also mentioned you might need assistance if you held a DA meeting and Professor Tonks was absent. A few of the professors have volunteered their time should you need it.”

“If... if Slytherin shows,” Harry said with not much hope in his voice, “we’ll need the extra wands.” Professor McGonagall looked at Harry with an intent look.

“Oh, they’ll come, Harry. Slytherins lack, shall we say, a certain amount of bravery? They’re frightened of what’s been happening and

driven by their own self-interest. Some, I'm sure, feel that this evil might triumph, and so are waiting to see what happens next. But even a handful of Slytherins looking to join will be a victory."

"Getting the Ravenclaws to accept them will be more difficult," Harry answered staring at the logs in the fire.

"Oh, I don't know, Harry." Professor McGonagall said holding his shoulder. "Most of them are looking to Cho for guidance. She can lead them in the proper direction. And, I understand the two of you have been seeing quite a bit of each other." There was a broad grin on Professor McGonagall's face.

"Yeah," Harry whispered and for an instant he began to return her smile as he stared at a Chintz chair, only to drop the look immediately. "I mean no. Er... no." It suddenly felt cool by the fire. "Professor, I really must get ready. Is there anything else?" Professor McGonagall was a bit perplexed, but shook her head.

"No, nothing more," she said as Harry turned to leave looking at his shoes and walking to the door. "You've grown quite a bit this last year Mr. Potter. Perhaps it's time to slow down a tad. Try to have some fun this morning. Go out and enjoy the sun." Harry nodded not looking back.

On the way to the Gryffindor common room, Harry was stopped by Malfoy who pulled him on the arm and dragged him to the side of the corridor. His gray eyes were steel and his brow furled.

"Scowling again, Draco," Harry said before Malfoy said a word. "It doesn't suit your scar."

"Polyjuice Potion, Potter?" Malfoy asked flatly.

"I don't understand, Draco," Harry replied calmly. "What are you talking about?" Malfoy squeezed his arm harder.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, Potter." Malfoy hissed. "I was nowhere near Hogsmeade yesterday. You know that. But

somehow, last night, I'm the hero of Slytherin. If they didn't think I was in it up to my neck before, they do now. You can

talk to snakes 'till your tongue ties, but they'll still think I'm in it." And then Malfoy's face broke out into a toothy grin, and he slapped Harry lightly on the face. "Thanks, Potter. Like I said before, Salazar would be proud." Malfoy began to laugh to himself as he headed back toward the front doors of the castle. Harry watched the blonde stride confidently away until he disappeared out of sight.

When Harry entered the Gryffindor common room those inside began to clap and cheer. Ginny who was holding hands with Dean by the window walked over and gave him a hug.

"It was brilliant, Harry!" she said. "You would have made Goderick Gryffindor proud!" Neville came up and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'd never have the guts to do it," he added. "Not even for Helen." His face flushed a shade of rose. Harry searched the common room. He needed to talk to Hermione. Ginny began to walk back to Dean at the window who was sulking. Probably because of the hug, Harry thought.

"Where's Hermione?" he asked.

"They're out," Ginny called back over her shoulder not thinking.

"They?" Harry asked. Ginny looked at Neville who looked at her, but Harry caught the glance in an instant. Knowing his easier target, Harry advanced on Neville. "Neville can we talk for a minute?" he asked in a bit too gentle voice. And then firmer, "Upstairs." Neville looked back to Ginny who was giving him a stern look Harry couldn't read, but guessed it was to keep quiet.

"Gee Harry," Neville sputtered. "I... er... gee." Neville started backing to the exit.

"Goyle made a pretty funny frog," Harry laughed with no humor behind the words. "Don't you think?" He slipped his hand to the sleeve where he kept his wand. "Come on, Neville. I really need to talk to you in private." Again Neville looked at Ginny who hadn't

moved from her position halfway between Harry and Dean. Her silence was not the support he needed.

“Erm... sure Harry,” he said nervously. “Just for a bit though. Helen’s waiting for me outside. We’re going to look for Fentaci-Fungi near the lake.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, shooting a glance to Ginny. “Just for a bit.” The two started up the stairs. “Finally,” Harry thought, “I’m going to discover what they’ve been up to.” And then he asked out loud to Neville. “Interesting, don’t you think? The war’s afoot, and the next day they come up missing. Where are they?”

“Well... you see...” Neville began as they entered the boys’ dormitory, “it’s just that...”

“PUT THAT DOWN!” Harry screamed ignoring Neville’s words. There in front of him, standing at his desk, was Greg Goyle holding Harry’s dragonhead in his hands slipping the large stone in and out of the creature’s mouth. The shock made him jump and the stone fell to the floor, rolling under Harry’s bed. “WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?” Harry yelled again, this time slipping his wand out and pointing it at Goyle’s head. Goyle began to tremble falling to his knees and reaching under Harry’s bed as he spoke.

“S-S-Sorry Harry,” he said shaking. “I was just... oh gees... I’m s-s-sorry.” He reached deep under the bed and when he pulled up he hit his head. “Ayyy!” Goyle yelped. The sight made Harry smile and the rage in his heart crashed like a wave on the beach disappearing into nothingness. Goyle quivered on the floor holding the stone in his outstretched hand toward Harry. He kneeled there shaking, as he looked the other way with his eyes closed waiting for the curse. Harry slipped the wand up his sleeve, snatched the stone from Goyle’s hand, and held it in his own. He walked over to the desk and placed it in the mouth of the dragonhead.

“It is beautiful,” he whispered. “Don’t you think?” Goyle opened one eye and scampered to his own bed and sat.

"Y-yes," he said nervously. "It's Cinnabar, I think." Harry looked at him with wide eyes. Goyle knew something about the stone? "They used to make Bludgers out of the stuff years ago before lead. The stone's brittle, but holds enchantments so well you can stop it from shattering." Harry stood astonished, while Goyle took a breath and gathered his composure. "I... I'm sorry Harry. I know that means a lot to you. It's just so... I don't know." Harry looked at Goyle and sat on his own bed holding his two treasures and turning them in his hands.

"I don't know either Greg," he whispered. "Did I tell you?" he asked, holding up the dragon. "A Muggle made this."

"Yeah," Goyle nodded. "Well, no... er... Ron did."

"Ron?" Harry thought and suddenly he remembered what he was there to do, but looking up, Neville was gone. "Damn!" Harry hissed. He put the dragonhead on his desk and ran to the top of the stairs. Neville was just leaving through the portrait. "Neville!" Harry yelled as he ran down to the common room. Ginny and Dean were gone. By the time he was out into the corridor, Neville had vanished. He ran a short way down the corridor, but only saw a few dozen random students. "You'll regret this Longbottom!" Harry yelled to the air turning heads everywhere. "I swear -- you'll pay!" He gritted his teeth and roared to himself clenching his fists. His arm began to ache again. Once again, he was angry, too angry really, and he didn't know why... he just was. They were up to something; he knew it. They were up to something and leaving him out.

For a while, Harry wandered the corridors looking for both Ginny and Neville, but with no luck. Often he was pulled aside and praised for his talk in the Great Hall, or asked about the afternoon's DA meeting. He hadn't given the DA meeting much thought. His mind was singularly focused on what everyone was up to that was so important or so dangerous Harry couldn't be involved.

After lunch, when the DA meeting did take place, Harry was relieved to find Professors Flitwick and McGonagall there to assist. More than a dozen Slytherins were in attendance. A respectable first showing, Harry thought, but their presence had everyone on edge. Ron and Hermione, noticeably, were absent. Ginny and Neville were also no-

shows. At first, Harry thought they were just avoiding him, but when he realized that Luna was gone, his mind assembled a different puzzle.

Everyone missing had been with him at the Ministry the year before in an attempt to save his godfather, Sirius. He had wanted them all to stay at Hogwarts, but they insisted they come. And in his vain attempt to play the hero, he nearly got them all killed. Now, the day after the attack on King's Cross Station, that same band of heroes was missing. All, that is, except Harry. He was coming to the realization that it wasn't just Ron and Hermione. They were all in on it. Dumbledore, and probably Tonks, were leading his friends into some sort of adventure. They were deliberately leaving Harry out of it to protect him... to keep him safe. Who else, Harry wondered, was in on it?

Professor Flitwick was working with a group of sixth years on camouflage charms. Students were near the indoor forest, and when the charm was cast they began to take on the appearance of the trees nearby. Harry, standing next to a large rock, found his clothes and hands turning a dark gray with white speckles that matched the marbling of the stone. As the students began to work with each other, Harry started over to Professor Flitwick. On his way he ran into a boulder that wasn't there a minute before, only to discover it was Goyle.

"Ouch! Oh, Sorry Greg," Harry said.

"No problem Harry," Goyle replied, grinning with dark gray teeth. "I think I'll try this one out on Crabbe when I get back." Goyle's words made Harry look around.

"Where is Crabbe?" Harry asked, "I thought maybe you might..."

"Malfoy," Goyle said sharply, his smile fading. "It all begins and ends with Malfoy, Harry. I'm not so sure I'll be coming to any more DA meetings after I go back." Harry simply nodded and continued to Professor Flitwick. He was complimenting Parvati, saying that her choice to blend in with a patch of yellow and purple wildflowers was visually stunning, if not the best defensive posture.

"Professor," Harry called. "May I have a word?" Professor Flitwick stepped away from the students and walked over to Harry.

"What is it Mr. Potter?" he asked a bit winded from the afternoon's efforts.

"Ron and Hermione," Harry asked simply, "do you know where they are?" A look of flushed embarrassment filled Professor Flitwick's face instantly. He began to twiddle with his wand not holding Harry's gaze. Slowly, he began to shake his head.

"Mr. Potter..." he looked up to meet his green eyes. "Harry... It's not my place to..."

"Then it's true!" Harry yelled, his voice echoing down the imitation streets of Hogsmeade. "I knew it! And Dumbledore didn't think I could handle it! Is that it?" he asked again, but didn't wait for the answer. "Am I that delicate, Professor? Do I need that much protection?" He could feel the rage building within as he gripped his wand so tight his fingers turned white. Professor Flitwick tried to put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"It is precisely this reaction..." he began, but Harry pulled away.

"Reaction? What reaction?" he snapped gritting his teeth into a toothy smile. "I'm fine!" He turned to rows of students firing spells at one another. "Enough! That's enough for today! Take some time to enjoy the sun!" he yelled still grinning and then turning to Professor Flitwick. "Isn't that right, sir? We wouldn't want them to grow up too quickly."

The students began to file out. Professor McGonagall left with Madame Guérir who was assisting a third year that had been slightly burned because he was too slow with his defensive spell. As Professor Flitwick was about to leave, he looked at Harry to speak, but then dropped his head and left the room. Harry noticed a first year Slytherin talking to a first year Ravenclaw about a wrist movement. For an instant his mind turned to his true purpose for being where he was. "The future," Harry thought. As the last of the students departed for the day, Cho came up to him and asked him how things were.

"I'm fine!" he snapped without cause. Undaunted, she came closer with a warm smile, but she was unable to defrost the ice from around his heart.

"I know something's wrong," she said kindly.

"Did you notice who was missing?" he said folding his arms and stomping out of the room and down the corridor.

"Sure," Cho replied. "Tonks was gone, but I heard she was off with Dumbledore. I hope they're okay." Her last words had a slight tremor in them as she glided down the corridor beside him.

"Not Tonks!" Harry yelled back, paying no attention to the fear in her voice. "Hermione and... oh... you wouldn't understand," he breathed in exasperation.

"Hermione?" Cho asked with a bit of frost on her own words now. "What about Hermione?" As they made their way to the entrance for Ravenclaw, Harry stopped and took Cho's arm. She clearly didn't understand Dumbledore's plans.

"Don't you see? She and Ron went off today and..."

"And why should that concern you?" Cho interrupted again with ever more ice in her voice. The interruption only sparked Harry's own frustration from being left out of whatever it was they were all doing. "Don't tell me you're jealous!"

"No!" Harry spat emphatically. But his eyes couldn't hold Cho's. He had to look away. He was jealous. Dumbledore was letting his two best friends work for the Order, while he was left to teaching students who would have nothing to do with the final outcome. Cho, however, read the look a different way.

"You are!" she said, her eyes widening. "Look at me, Harry!" Now it was Cho who took Harry's arm as she looked into his face. Then, she spoke very slowly. "Tell me. Are you jealous of Ron?" Again, Harry missed her point.

"I told you!" Harry pulled away. "I don't give a damn what they do!" He still couldn't look her in the face, but the surety of his answer seemed to satisfy Cho. A small smile of triumph crossed her face. This time she put both arms around Harry and hugged him.

"You don't need her, Harry," she whispered. "You don't need either of them." She reached up and stroked the side of his face. Harry, looking down into Cho's smile, seeing her beautiful brown eyes look into his, felt the rage and jealousy melt away. He smiled back at her and sighed deeply, letting the tensions slip away.

"You're right, as always. Thank you, Cho," he said putting his own hand to her face and then hugging her. His heart lightened, but as he looked into her eyes, they darkened to black. Harry blinked and shook his head. When he looked back they were again chestnut brown. A shiver went down his spine and he began to tremble slightly. "Cho... listen," he began. "We need to talk. Our paths..."

"Shhh," she breathed holding a finger to his lips. Cho pulled him close to her and gently laid her head on his chest. "I don't know what our future holds, Harry. But... right now... I need you." Hearing her own words, she laughed to herself as a tear streaked down her face and fell to the floor. "We all need you."

Chapter 31 - Opportunity for Disaster

Harry stood at a large mahogany table pondering the purpose of the strange silver instrument spinning before him. He'd walked in to find out what was going on. It was a thirst for information he shared with all his classmates, and part of him felt uncomfortable for using his relationship with Professor Dumbledore to such ends. Everyone had seen Professor Dumbledore at breakfast, and had fully assumed he'd make some sort of speech, but he didn't. He ate quietly, spoke a few words with Professor McGonagall and left the Great Hall. After Charms, Harry came straight to his office hoping to find him, hoping to finally learn what his two best friends were doing behind his back. When Professor Dumbledore welcomed him in, it was with a half-hearted smile and a gloomy face. Clearly, something was concerning the Headmaster, and the expression threw Harry off his stride. Now, looking at his own reflection in the silver disk spinning on the table, Harry was at a loss for how to begin.

"Have you seen the golden instruments at Grimmauld Place?" Harry asked hesitantly. "I've never seen anything quite like them."

"Yes," said Professor Dumbledore, nodding from behind his desk. "They are quite unique." He held his hands together at his chin. "Should you go on to become an Auror, you will learn about such things. As he delved further into the Dark Arts, Sirius's grandfather had those especially made. It is a shame that such a great a Wizarding mind wasted so much of his life in search of immortality. And so it is with Tom," Dumbledore shook his head. There was a short pause as Harry shuffled his feet. "And yet, I don't believe you came here to discuss the toys of wizards, or the resurrection of the dead. Did you, Harry?" The sixteen year old turned and adjusted his glasses as he looked at Professor Dumbledore.

"Where's Tonks?" he asked flatly. "She wasn't at breakfast this morning." Professor Dumbledore bit at his upper lip and shook his head.

"I don't know, Harry," he replied weakly with a small tinge of apprehension in his voice. "She and Ms. Granger..."

“Hermione?” Harry rudely interrupted. Dumbledore nodded, and Harry’s face reddened.

“Professor Tonks and Ms. Granger were working on a method to track an apparition.”

“But that’s impossible,” Harry replied. His emotions were torn between anger for being left out, and curiosity for what had been done. “Isn’t it? I mean, once a wizard apparates, they’re gone.”

“Amazingly,” Professor Dumbledore replied, “Ms. Granger developed the calculation in her Arithmancy class.” The old wizard grinned. “Truly astounding, really. Professor Tonks practiced the technique with another witch in Hogsmeade, and with good success.” The white-haired wizard’s face again became grim. “Your tip was helpful, Harry. Professor Tonks and I had nearly a dozen wizards and witches watching King’s Cross Station as well as other locations across the country. I was at the Ministry when word came of the explosion. We were able to stop two other attacks including one at the under channel crossing to France. Two of Voldemort’s followers were apprehended at King’s Cross Station. One of the attackers apparated, and this time Nymphadora followed. That’s the last we’ve heard of her.” Professor Dumbledore stood and walked over to the spinning silver instrument. He held out his wand and what appeared to be a field of stars suddenly surrounded the spinning silver disk.

“Each of these,” Professor Dumbledore began pointing at one of the stars, “is a member of the Order.” He smiled looking down at Harry. “We’ve grown somewhat since last year. Only a few of us know of our new foreign recruits.” And then his face turned grim again. “I should see all our members unless there is some magical cloak at play or...” his voice trailed off.

“Or what, Professor?” Harry asked weakly.

“It will not show me the dead, Harry,” Professor Dumbledore replied. He raised his wand and the field of stars vanished. “My fear is that she was successful, but with no one there to assist....” The creases on Professor Dumbledore’s face deepened as he sat back down in his chair. The leather seemed to gasp under his weight. He looked

more tired than Harry had ever seen him. For the first time Harry felt that, perhaps, they were losing the war. Harry walked over to Professor Dumbledore's desk. He knew his selfish desire to learn about Ron and Hermione was trivial compared to the lives being lost at the hands of Voldemort. He thought to ask about his scar, about Dobby, about his growing moodiness, about the crimson stone, but his mind couldn't let go of the adventures that his two best friends were having, adventures from which he was excluded. He had to know.

"Professor...", Harry began, "yesterday... Ron and Hermione were gone. Do you know where?" Professor Dumbledore's eyes seemed to lighten at the question as he looked back at Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles. It was an expression Harry had not anticipated.

"Yes," he said simply. At the word, Harry stepped backward and looked for something, anything other than Professor Dumbledore to hold his gaze. He fixed first on Fawkes. The phoenix must have just flamed, for he was covered in white down and only a few inches tall.

"W-Well...", Harry stammered. "I thought you might. I mean... them working for the Order and all. Probably an important..."

"Who's working for the Order?" Dumbledore asked derailing Harry's attempt at cogent speech. Harry still couldn't look Professor Dumbledore in the eye, and instead shuffled over to the painting of Dilys Derwent who winked and smiled, but said nothing.

"Erm... you know... Ron and Hermione. I'm sure it was important and all. They're..."

"Harry," Dumbledore interrupted again, "I needn't remind you, of all people, that there is an age restriction on being a member of the Order of the Phoenix." There was a slight smile on the elderly wizard's face. "Neither Ron or Hermione are of age. Nor, I might add, are you." Professor Dumbledore stood again and walked over to Harry turning him so that they could see each other face-to-face.

"Harry, I know you want to be out there fighting Dementors and Death Eaters. But, the time, your time, is not at hand. We both know you're

capable. We both know you're brave. I have no doubt that you would perform as well, if not better, than many of the Aurors in the Ministry. And yet, your greatest strength is not what you can do with your wand, but what you can do here at Hogwarts with this." Dumbledore held his hand over Harry's chest. "Your heart. Such magic is deep and impenetrable, and should you succeed, Voldemort will surely fail." He walked over to Fawkes and conjured a small piece of fish for the bird.

"Professor McGonagall told me how you performed in the Great Hall in my absence. A bit theatrical, perhaps," Professor Dumbledore grinned, "but admirable. You have offered the students at Hogwarts choices they never before dreamed possible. And I hear nearly a dozen Slytherins came to your meeting on Sunday."

Somehow thoughts of the battles his friends were facing faded from his mind, and Harry was thoroughly embarrassed for coming to Professor Dumbledore's office. He nodded, feeling both proud for the wizard's praise and sheepish at the same time. Professor Dumbledore patted the side of Harry's head, and noticed the silver lightning-bolt.

"I think you have some choices to make yourself, Harry," he said, his voice light but firm. "And I don't think they involve Voldemort." Harry reached up and stroked the silver.

"No," he said. "No sir, they don't." Harry started to the door. "It's almost lunch, I best be going." He walked through the door holding his right forearm with his left hand. Surely he should ask. He stopped and looked back at Professor Dumbledore, but the words failed him in favor of his primary goal. "Pardon me Professor, but if Ron and Hermione are not working for the Order, what did you have them doing?" At these words, Professor Dumbledore smiled and put his arm around Harry.

"I have often found, Harry, that the quickest way to find out what someone is doing or thinking is to ask them directly. It is not always successful, but quite often the eyes reveal the truth. Nevertheless, I believe they've been telling you for some time, what you would not hear."

As Harry left Professor Dumbledore's office, he could again feel his emotions splashing and splattering around in different directions. The thought that Tonks might be dead was foremost in his mind as he made his way to the Great Hall for lunch. When he entered, he saw Ron and Hermione seated next to Neville, Lavender and Parvati. When he looked toward the Ravenclaw table, he saw Luna reading a newspaper. There was space between Neville and Goyle who towered over the other Gryffindors. Harry walked to the empty space and sat down.

Goyle was busy putting fork to mouth, but Neville seemed to have suddenly lost his appetite. A plate with a corn-beef sandwich, potato salad and chips appeared before Harry. A glass of milk followed. Everyone, but Goyle, was looking at him apprehensively as he took a sip from the glass and set it back down on the table. He grabbed the sandwich and started to take a bite when Hermione broke the silence.

"Well," she said, her voice a bit shaky, "what did he say?" Harry looked at Hermione and placed the sandwich back down on his plate. He turned to Neville at his side.

"Neville," he said calmly, "I owe you an apology." He put his hand on Neville's shoulder. "If I ever act like that again, you can turn me into a toad, okay?" Harry smiled and Neville smiled back.

"I would if I knew how," said Neville regaining his appetite.

"Maybe I can show you at the next DA meeting," Harry said. "Greg, do you think you could give us a hand?" Everyone started to laugh.

"Very funny, Potter," said Goyle, smiling back with a drip of sauce running down the corner of his full mouth. "Very funny." He swallowed and wiped his chin, but then his face became stern. "I hope you haven't forgotten the first match is this weekend. We are practicing tonight, aren't we?"

"Katie's reserved the pitch," Ron jumped in. "She says to eat dinner quick and be ready to go." Throughout, Hermione's eyes had been fixed on Harry since her first question.

“Harry,” she started again, “what did he say?”

Thoughts of Tonks being dead and Voldemort winning the war flooded into Harry’s mind. He couldn’t bring himself to tell them Tonks might be dead. His stomach lurched, and then he thought of his own choice between black or brown eyes. He suddenly had lost his appetite and pushed his plate forward.

“Finished,” he whispered and the plate vanished. The long pause had them all worried as they waited for Harry to answer. Finally, he looked at Hermione in the eyes.

“He said I should ask you myself,” Harry said leaning in across the table.

“Ask me what?” she asked.

“Where were you and Ron yesterday?” Harry asked watching her eyes as they darted to look at Ron, and back to Harry. There was a collective rustle as everyone who heard the question repositioned in their seats. Harry looked at them all. Even Parvati and Padma seemed anxious to hear the answer.

“I just don’t think now’s a good time, Harry,” Hermione whispered. He looked intently into her eyes, looking for an answer. Again, she looked to Ron. “I swear I... we’ll...”

“If you don’t tell him,” Ron said with a strong clear voice, “I will.” Ron looked from Hermione and then to Harry. “No more lies, right, Harry?” Hermione was clearly nervous and uncomfortable.

“Not here,” she said. “Not like this.”

“Oh, come on Hermione,” Parvati chimed in. “It’s not like we all don’t already know anyhow.” Hermione began to redden.

“Really, girl,” Lavender added, “it’s the worst kept secret at Hogwarts.”

Hermione looked like a trapped rabbit. Everyone, including Ron, was waiting for her to say what they all, all but Harry, already knew. She reached across the table and took Harry's hand.

"Promise me, Harry," she began furling her brow and looking quite nervous, "that you won't be mad."

"I promise," Harry said dismissively. "There's nothing you can say that I haven't thought of already."

"Well, this summer, Ron and I..."

"I knew it!" Harry jumped in. "Vacation! Hah! What did he have you do? Come on... what was it? Spy?" Hermione, who had barely enough fortitude to start in the first place, was suddenly at a loss.

"Spy?" she asked.

"Okay," Harry replied, "maybe not spy, but something surely. Did it start in Germany?"

"Well," Hermione said looking back at Ron and taking his hand. "I think it's been going on for some time really. It was just this summer when things got serious."

"Of course," Harry said taking to his feet and pacing as if to assemble all the parts of the puzzle. The only problem was that he had the wrong pieces. "Things only really got serious when the Ministry saw You-Know-Who, right? I just don't understand why it was just you two, and not me. I suppose Ginny and Neville are in on it too?"

"Ginny's known since..." Ron said smiling at Hermione, "since before we did I think." Harry grinned putting both hands on the table and leaning in. Somehow, the fact that they were finally clearing the air made Harry's heart lighter. It didn't really matter that they had gone on to work against Voldemort, even if it wasn't for the Order. They didn't really need to now that Ron's dad was leading the effort against Voldemort at the Ministry.

"Ginny's always been brilliant," Harry whispered. "You know, you could have just told me. I might have been a bit jealous at first, but I would have gotten over it."

"I don't think you quite understand, Harry," Hermione said uneasily. "Look, you've enough to be going on about without worrying about Ron and me. If I'd have known you were this upset..."

"But I'm not upset, Hermione. Honestly, I'm not," Harry shot back too quickly. "True, my mind's been on... other things since I left Little Whinging." His voice trailed off, and he looked over at Cho who was laughing at Anthony Goldstein. Anthony had made some sort of Quidditch doll in red robes and was showing it getting whacked by a Bludger from behind. Suddenly, inexplicably, the blood in Harry's veins caught fire. He'd lost all thread of what he'd been talking about and all his attention turned to Anthony and Cho. Cho wiped tears of laughter from her face and held Anthony's arm.

"Excuse me," he whispered through gritted teeth.

"But, Harry!" Hermione called out, exasperated.

Harry ignored her, and found himself walking over to the Ravenclaw table, the urge to throttle Anthony strong, when out of nowhere a stabbing pain ran down his arm. Joe Blunt, a Beater on the Ravenclaw team, had his wand out pointing it at Harry under his robes. To Harry it all seemed to happen in slow motion. Joe whispered something, and a yellow light began to leave the tip of his wand.

"Looooook Ouuuuuut!" Hermione yelled from behind him. Harry spun, reaching for his own wand.

"Protego!" Harry yelled, wand drawn, just as the beam of light was upon him. The light bounced off an invisible shield in front of Harry and was deflected directly into Anthony's back.

Anthony's face turned white, and immediately he began to vomit all over the front of Cho's robes. There was general screaming at the Ravenclaw table, and soon some of the first years began to throw-up

as well. Joe stood up and began to slink away when Cho levitated from the table and ensnared him in ropes.

“Joe Blunt!” she screamed. “Look at me!” She was about to cast another spell when Professor McGonagall called out.

“Everyone! Return to your seats!” she yelled. A few heads turned to see Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, and the somehow more intimidating Hagrid standing at the head table. The room fell silent except for Anthony who kept retching on the floor. Professor McGonagall turned to the nearest student at the Gryffindor table, James Chang.

“James,” she said, “escort Mr. Goldstein to the hospital wing. Tell Madam Pomfrey what has happened.” James took to his feet. “Wait,” Professor McGonagall called. She conjured up a large purple bucket and handed it to him. “Have him carry this along the way. Mr. Filch will be angry enough when he sees what’s happened here.” James grabbed the bucket and helped Anthony up. When the two left the Great Hall, Professor McGonagall addressed the remaining students silencing the Slytherin table, which was beside itself with laughter.

“The rest of you,” she called out, “get cleaned up and ready for class. There will be no excuses for tardiness!” She then turned to Professor Flitwick. “Filius, I believe Mr. Blunt belongs to Ravenclaw?” Professor Flitwick rolled his eyes and nodded his head.

“Yes, yes,” he squeaked. “And they tell me my house has all the smart ones! Taking on Harry Potter....” Professor Flitwick just shook his head and proceeded to the Ravenclaw table. “Are you insane, boy!” he chided, as he unbound Blunt and took him by the scruff of the neck with some sort of clenching charm out of the Great Hall. Cho, still wet, went over to the Gryffindor table.

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” she said earnestly. “I heard some rumblings from a few of the team members that they needed to get an edge for this weekend’s match, but I’d never dreamt they’d turn a wand on you.”

“Listen...Cho,” Harry began.

"Hold that thought, Harry," she said. "I've got to get out of these clothes and ready before class." And she was off before Harry could say another word.

On the way to Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry found himself walking with Ron and Hermione. His preference to shun Ron was overcome by his keen desire to learn about what missions the two had been performing. They had just left the Great Hall when Hermione began on a different track.

"You know, Harry, we haven't discussed your," she paused, "your gift for quite some time. I've been reading books all over on wandless magic. In some ways it's really rare, and in some ways it isn't."

"I don't understand," Harry said as they climbed the stairs. "Everyone who sees it always raises an eyebrow."

"Well, Harry," she replied in a way Harry knew meant she'd never finish before they made it to class, "it's all a question of magnitude. I mean... wizards can all do little things to change the world around them. Usually it's a form of telekinesis or conjuration. Some enchantments can be done to objects without a wand, and certainly hexes can be placed on people as long as eye contact is maintained." They rounded the first corridor to Professor Tonks' classroom. "The point is you're doing it on a much greater scale. It's as if you've tapped into to some huge energy source and are projecting it at will. Normally, that's what wands are used for. In your case, a wand just makes your spells that much more powerful." They were nearly to the classroom. "I don't know Harry, it might have something to do with," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "your arm. It might be some kind of controlling hex to make you stronger so that you can do someone else's bidding. Or maybe you've discovered a new form of energy. But nothing's really changed in your life since last year, has it? I know you were getting along better with the Dursley's, but that just doesn't seem powerful enough to me." They were at the door when Hermione looked to Harry for some kind of answer.

"Fascinating, Hermione," Harry said. "Thank you." With that he entered the class. They weren't late, but they weren't early either.

Hermione stepped forward to sit with Ron. Standing in the front of the room with crossed arms and wearing a scowl, was Professor Snape. Harry made to sit with Malfoy as he always did in Tonks' class, but Malfoy slid the open chair further under the table and looked the other way. Harry took the cue and headed to the empty seat where Anthony usually sat next to Parvati. Evidently Joe's spell was still doing its business. Harry smiled.

"Well, if it isn't the king and queen of the castle," Professor Snape sneered and a few of the Slytherins laughed. "I'm so glad you both could take time out of your busy schedule to join us." Parvati put her hand on Harry's lap and patted it to calm him, but Harry was calm. He had, for the most part, learned to control his emotions when it came to Severus Snape.

"Forgive us, sir," Harry said apologetically. The words caught Snape off guard.

"Is Professor Tonks ill, sir?" asked Parvati in a concerned voice. The glib look on Snape's face vanished. For the first time in Harry's memory, Professor Snape looked concerned about something other than his own neck.

"Professor Tonks," Snape replied regaining his composure, "will return as soon as she is able." He strode over to a large desk at the front of the room and pulled open their textbook. So far this year, Tonks had only referred to it a few times. Nearly all their work had been practical. "Ms. Granger, how far have you progressed through your text?"

"Well, Professor, we haven't really used the text all that much."

"I see," Snape answered, a thin smile returning to his face. "Then who, other than Ms. Granger, can tell me the three primary defensive spells?" Only a few students raised their hands, nearly all of them Ravenclaws. Professor Snape, however, called on the one student who seemed the least interested. "Mr. Malfoy, perhaps you would share your insights?" Malfoy seemed only to slouch lower in his chair.

“Protego,” he answered with a bored voice. “Protego, and I suppose Expelliarmus, would be another.”

“Very good,” Snape said. “And the last?” Malfoy looked uncomfortable, almost irritated for being asked the question.

“Áreddotu, Professor,” he said finally.

“Excellent!” Snape praised. “Ten points for Slytherin.” Neville raised his hand. “Yes, Mr. Longbottom?”

“I’m sorry, Professor, but Áreddotu? What’s that?” Professor Snape shook his head putting his fingers to his brow.

“As I suspected,” Professor Snape sneered. “The use of constant substitutions throughout the years has been harming your education.”

“It’s a reflection spell, Neville,” Hermione said. “If the caster...”

“I don’t recall anyone asking your opinion, Ms. Granger,” Professor Snape chided smiling. “Five points from Gryffindor.” Hermione’s face hardened to stone, and fire lit her eyes, but she said nothing. Professor Snape then turned back to Neville. “It is indeed a reflection spell, Mr. Longbottom. It returns the spell back to the sender. It’s advantageous if you know the spell you’re about to be hit with. It is poorly used without such knowledge.”

“Can it be used against the Unforgivable...”

“No it can not,” Snape answered briskly. “For such curses there is very little that can be done without a strong mind, and so you have very little hope, I’m afraid.” Snape walked back to the front of the class. “For the killing curse there is no known way to stop it.”

“I’m not so sure of that Professor.” A young woman’s voice shot from the back of the classroom. All heads turned to see who it was, including Harry’s. There, at the back of the room, was Tonks. Harry’s heart skipped, others gasped. There were two large scratches across the right side of her face and, as she stepped forward, she walked with a distinctive limp. She stared at Snape without blinking. “That’s a

bit overblown, don't you think?" she asked with an intellectual tone. Though concerned about her injuries, Harry had to smile. Professor Snape on the other hand was completely speechless. He simply gawked at her as she continued to limp to the front of the class.

"I mean," she continued, "as long as you're not directly hit by the curse, you can survive. And there are a number of ways to avoid being hit by the green light, wouldn't you say?"

"Of course," Professor Snape offered quietly, "that might be true, yes. But the point is..."

"The point is," Tonks interrupted, "that I am deeply indebted to you for watching my class in my absence. I believe I can handle the rest of the afternoon's lesson. Thank you." Snape's brow furled and his hand came to his chin.

"Do you think that wise, Professor?" he asked. "Wouldn't you prefer to..."

"I prefer teaching my class, Professor Snape. Again, thank you for your assistance. Good day." She walked over to the text on the desk, closed its pages, and handed it to Professor Snape. "I believe this is yours?" Hesitantly, Professor Snape took the book from her hand, and then he leaned over and whispered something in her ear that Harry could not hear. Tonks nodded with a slight smile that Snape did not see. Quickly, he strode out the room and shut the door behind him. The class erupted into cheers, and Tonks was bombarded by a dozen questions in the same instant. Tonks raised her hand, but only to about chest level. She was clearly in pain. The room silenced.

"Áreddotu is a very advanced spell," she said sitting on the chair at her desk. "To use it wisely, it is true one must have knowledge of the spell being cast. Further, if the wrong wrist movement is applied, the caster might simply amplify the attacker's curse onto his or her self." She proceeded to show the class the correct movement and incantation. After some time of working without wands she clapped her hands. "Break out into pairs," she said, "and try to use the spell against a mood lightening charm. At least we can all leave the class happy today." As the class started to split out into pairs, Harry noticed

Tonks starting to swoon a bit and then sit back in her chair. He began to walk over to her, but she pointed her wand at him.

“Mr. Potter,” she said sternly, “you have work to do. Questions can come later.” Harry hesitated, but continued toward her. “Go on, Harry,” she whispered in all the commotion. “I’m fine.” Finally, Harry turned to find a partner only to discover Malfoy, still slouching in his chair, as the odd man out.

“Do you have any friends, Draco?” said Harry with a sigh, and lining up against the blonde. Giggles were already beginning to be heard around the room. Neville and Helen were in a particularly happy mood, although Harry hadn’t seen them cast a spell yet. “He better keep her out of the dormitory, that’s all I can say,” he mumbled to himself.

“Sneaking girls from other houses in to Gryffindor?” Malfoy asked Harry as he looked at Neville. “Perhaps there’s hope yet.”

“You’re hopeless, Draco, and if you tell a soul...”

“Shall we try something with a bit more... fire, than a mood lightening charm?” Malfoy drawled. The boredom had left his face, and was replaced with pure mischief. Harry looked over at Tonks whose eyes were fixed on the far side of the room. “Looking for mommy’s permission, Potter? Maybe you aren’t Slytherin material!” Harry drew his wand and moved to a relatively empty part of the classroom. He’d never attempted this spell, and a miss on the first time would mean scorched fingers. The only heartening aspect was that beads of perspiration were popping out on Malfoy’s forehead. Clearly he was a bit nervous too.

“You first, then?” Harry asked. Malfoy pulled his wand. “And Draco, when this comes back into your face, you may want to try and deflect it here. He pointed his wand at an empty dustbin and filled it with water. No one paid any attention as Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry.

“Incendio!” he called out. A streak of fire shot toward Harry as he called out the new incantation.

“Áreddotu.” he said quietly. The fire stopped in midair and started on its path back toward Malfoy. The call of the fire spell turned much of the class their way, including Tonks.

“Protego!” Malfoy yelled, and the fire deflected itself off him, but not back to Harry. Instead, it was headed straight for Neville who was standing some ten feet right of Harry. Quickly, Harry pointed his wand at the water and levitated the dustbin in front of Neville just in time for the fire to hit it, burst the dustbin, and spray warm water all over Neville. Malfoy burst out laughing as Neville’s soaked robes dripped warm water to the floor.

“Enough!” Tonks yelled. “Ten points from both your houses. And you’ve just landed yourself in detention. See me after class, which is right now. Class dismissed!” The students began to walk out, as Hermione walked over to Neville and dried him instantly with a flick of her wand.

“I could have used that the first night we were here,” Neville said.

“Neville, I don’t want to think what the Professors would have done if anybody had lifted a wand that night,” replied Hermione as she looked back at Harry. She nodded her head toward Tonks in a ‘find out what happened’ look.

Harry and Malfoy stood waiting for the last students to leave. Malfoy, twiddling with his wand, had a smirk on his face. Harry, to the contrary, was trying to remember why it seemed like such a good idea at the time to bounce fire around the room. Tonks limped over to the two of them. The scratches across her face had vanished.

“What a pair of self-centered showoffs!” Her words were intense, but not loud. “Following simple directions isn’t good enough for the two of you. You’re too above regular lessons?” Malfoy snickered, and in a flash Tonks had her wand in his face, which instantly lost what little colour it had. She tapped the side of Malfoy’s face that didn’t have a scar. “I can give you a matching pair if you like Mr. Malfoy. Although I dare say my artwork would not be as refined.” Malfoy began to tremble, and he shook his head.

“Good,” Tonks said with a satisfied grin. She limped back to her desk and slowly lowered herself into her chair. “I believe four detentions should do the trick. We’ll begin tonight.” Harry’s jaw dropped instantly.

“That’s detention every night this week, and the match against Ravenclaw’s this Saturday!” Harry pleaded. “Can’t we...”

“Tonight!” Tonks said sharply.

Whatever interest he had in Tonks’ injuries left Harry’s mind in a flash. He could feel a sense of rage building inside. Something was wrong, very wrong. Clearly she was possessed! He clenched his teeth and took a step towards Tonks, but Malfoy grabbed his shoulder.

“Come on, Potter,” Malfoy said coolly. “Let’s go.” Harry looked at him as if he were crazy. “We’ll see you tonight, Professor,” Malfoy said politely with a smile.

As the two students walked down the corridor, it was Malfoy who was correcting Harry. “What’s with you, Potter?” he asked. “You were about to go off on a Professor!” And then he grinned. “I should have let you do it. I wonder what your precious Dumbledore would say then.”

“Well at least I’m not kissing up to my head of house!” Harry snapped back. “Don’t tell me you actually read the book.” Malfoy simply shrugged.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he quipped. “Sure, I read the book. I was told to read it last night. Not the whole book, mind you, just the part on the three primary defensive spells.”

“A set-up?” Harry asked.

“Like I said Potter,” Malfoy drawled, “maybe you aren’t Slytherin material.” The two walked for a few moments.

“When I walked in, you pushed your chair in,” Harry said. “Why? I sit next to you in...” Malfoy pulled Harry to the side of the corridor.

"Don't play so thick with me, Potter," he sneered. "I know you and Snape have hated each other since day one. And if you're so connected to You-Know-Who's thoughts, it's pretty obvious why. Snape's in with him and you know it," Malfoy hissed.

"How do you..." Harry began.

"My father was a Slytherin, Potter." Malfoy's eyes darted around ensuring they were alone. "He loved the power of being a pure-blood." Malfoy shook his head, his face held a look of disgust. "But that's not where true power comes from, Potter. It was his failure in understanding that fact that put him in Azkaban." Malfoy's eyes narrowed, and his expression grew cold. "Knowledge is power," he whispered. "Knowing where the pieces are set upon the board. Knowing their strengths, their loyalties." Again, Malfoy took Harry by the arm and pulled him further off the main corridor. "Together, we could assemble the whole board. Together, we would know all the pieces. Together, we would shape the outcome of this war to our own advantage."

Harry began to pull away, but Malfoy held him tight. "Do you think the Ministry gives a damn about your vision of togetherness, Potter? Do you think they care about how many Muggles die before this war is over? We can make a difference... Harry."

Harry began to answer, when he looked up to see Crabbe and Nott passing on their way to the Slytherin common room. Malfoy looked back over his shoulder.

"I swear you'll pay, Potter!" Malfoy yelled. "The only time I'm ever in detention is because of you. Think about what I've said!" Malfoy shoved Harry against the wall and walked over to Crabbe and Nott, both snickering at what they'd just seen.

Harry watched them disappear down the stairs. He found himself trembling, and he wasn't sure why. If he could discover Voldemort's whereabouts... if Malfoy knew... Harry could.... The possibilities were beginning to spread through his mind like a rapidly expanding cloud in the sky.

“Yes,” Harry whispered to himself. “Yes, it just might work.”

Chapter 32 - Escape from Azkaban

Harry woke to the sound of footsteps leaving the boys' dormitory. A glance to the window told him it was still quite early. Low in the sky was a bright crescent moon, and only the faintest shade of purple was glowing to the east. He sat up in bed rubbing his eyes and groaned thinking of his day to come. He would have Potions this morning, and because of last night's Astronomy lesson and detention with Tonks, he hadn't finished his parchment on the uses of ground dragon scales. Worse, he would have to tell Katie that he couldn't practice tonight because he had yet another detention with Tonks. Again, he let out a deep sigh and sat up in bed. Neville's bed was empty, but everyone else was still sleeping. He decided to get up and try to finish his scroll for Potions.

After he had showered and dressed, he made his way down, books in hand, to the common room. The room was deserted save for two sitting on the couch in front of the fire.

"Neville?" Harry asked. "Incandessa forte," he whispered and the candles in the common room burned bright. Neville looked back over the couch shielding his eyes.

"Hey, Harry, come on," he complained. "You're kinda spoiling the mood, you know."

"Mood?" Harry asked. But just then he noticed that next to Neville was a brunette with a grand blue flower in her hair, Helen Hedera. "Neville!" Harry hissed quietly through gritted teeth. "Can I speak with you for a moment." Each word seemed to carry more emphasis. Neville sighed and walked over to Harry.

"What is it, Harry?" he asked a bit peeved. "We're kinda busy you know."

"Yeah," Harry shot back, "I can see that." He pulled Neville by the arm to the side of the room. "She can't be in here, Neville. I know you think she's the greatest person in world, but the rules..."

“Don’t talk to me about rules, Harry,” Neville interrupted. “You’re the last person to be giving advice about rules. What? Do you think Ron or Hermione are going to give me detention?” Neville grinned, but Harry just glowered at him, his eyes like daggers.

“It’s not detention you need to worry about, Neville.” For a moment Neville seemed resolute to stay, staring back into Harry’s eyes defiantly. But his courage faltered, and he turned and walked back to the couch.

“Fine!” he shot out. “Come on Helen, let’s go down to the lake and watch the solapria turn to the rising sun.” Helen stood up, but wore a bright smile.

“I’m sorry,” she said nervously. “I know it was an intrusion.” Neville put his arm around her, and the pair walked out the portrait of the Fat Lady. Harry wasn’t sure why he should feel so strongly about Helen in the common room, but something deep inside was telling him she was a danger.

Harry sat at the large oak table to the back of the common room and finished his Potions homework as best he could. He was making his way down to breakfast with Dennis Creevey when Katie called him from behind.

“Potter!” she yelled stopping the two in the corridor and striding up to them with her finger pointed straight at Harry’s nose. “If I had a galleon for every time you were in detention...” Her face was furious. “How many more nights?”

“Just three more,” Harry replied innocently, but Katie was having none of it.

“You’re out until the game? You know we were going to practice Goyle’s new strategy,” she fired back. “That’s why we had the pitch reserved for two nights this week. How are we supposed to signal the Seeker, if the Seeker’s in detention? You need to know what the signals look like!” Harry’s shoulders slumped. Katie was right, of course.

“Uh, Katie,” Dennis cut in quietly. “I have an idea. What about Colin?”

“Your brother?” Katie queried. “Why on earth...”

“He can play Seeker and...”

“Seeker! Are you out of your...”

“Listen!” Dennis interrupted the strength in his voice pushing Katie back half a step. “He can record the practice with a video, and Harry can watch it later. It’s not as good as being there, but at least Harry will have an idea about what to look for on Friday’s practice.” Katie looked confused, but Harry’s face broke out in a broad smile.

“Brilliant, Dennis” he grinned. “Absolutely brilliant!” Harry turned to Katie. “Well, there you go. Colin can play me as Seeker tonight while the rest of the team tries Goyle’s handiwork. Then, Colin can show me the important stuff later tonight.” Harry patted Katie, who still looked confused, on the back. “Problem solved, Katie.” And he and Dennis headed off to breakfast.

A bit further down the corridor, Harry turned to Dennis and asked, “You do know electronics are totally useless on the Hogwarts grounds?”

“You do know my brother’s a genius when it comes to photography?” he asked back with a smile.

After breakfast, Harry walked to Potions with Hermione. Every time Harry asked her about her theory on apparation tracking, she tried to turn the conversation to Tonks’ injuries. Once in class, the two turned their parchments in along with everyone else, but it was Harry’s parchment that Professor Snape decided to read to the whole class. Well, not so much read as criticize. Without even looking at Harry’s parchment, Professor Snape walked to Harry as he sat preparing the day’s potion. Glowering over Harry with a smug look on his face his sneering voice reverberated off the stone walls.

“Potter,” he began, holding the parchment high for the others to see, “do you really believe that these scribblings are sufficient to answer

the question posed for your lesson?" Harry didn't think it was his best work, but it wasn't his worst either, and certainly it was better than many that were submitted. He looked at Snape's face, and realized the trap being set. Harry would not lose his temper.

"Sir, I gave it a solid effort," Harry returned sincerely. "It will require your expertise to determine its quality."

"I had asked for ten pages on dragon scales, and you return only nine and a half," Snape sneered. Harry knew that Cho had submitted only eight, and Marietta only five. "And your description on the various grinding techniques is completely insufficient."

"I'm sorry sir."

"I'm sorry too, Potter." Professor Snape tore the parchment to pieces, not having read it at all, and sprinkled them in front of Harry. "Let's try again, shall we? And this time be more thorough." Professor Snape stood waiting for the reaction, but Harry gave him none.

"Absolutely, sir," he replied, pushing the pieces of paper together like a spilt deck of cards. "Sorry, sir." He placed the pieces in his robe pocket. Professor Snape stood still waiting, but Harry looked up to him smiling and then back to the day's lesson steps on the board. He began crushing his Tentacula Root counterclockwise, flashed Snape another sincere smile, and returned to the work at hand. The professor gave a feint snort and briskly paced to the other side of the room to examine Marietta's work. As he crossed the dungeon, Hermione patted Harry on the knee.

"Brilliant, Harry," she said handing him one of the scraps. "We can put these together tonight and he'll never even know." Harry grinned, gave her a wink, and poured the root into his caldron.

Later, in Care of Magical Creatures, Hagrid presented the class with nearly a dozen poisonous creatures. Snakes, insects, spiders, and hybrids Harry had never seen before. After the lesson, the class was assigned the task of ranking the creatures by determining which would kill them the fastest. As Harry started back to the castle, Crabbe, Goyle and Ron stopped him at the bottom of the steps.

Crabbe's eyes kept darting back up to the castle as the rest of the class disappeared into the front doors. It was clear Crabbe didn't want to be seen, but Goyle was steady and still as the lake.

"Hey, Harry," Goyle spoke first. "Detention with Malfoy tonight?" Harry looked at the threesome wondering what was going on.

"Yes," he said waiting for where this would lead.

"I have it on good authority," Goyle glanced over at Crabbe who reminded Harry somewhat of a nervous rat he knew, "that Malfoy wanted you in detention for a purpose." Harry furrowed his brow.

"Why? So I couldn't practice for the Quidditch match?" Harry asked incredulously.

"He thinks he can bring you into his confidence," Ron answered. "He thinks he can get you to talk about... well... you know." Harry's eyes narrowed on Ron.

"And we don't talk about those things, do we Ron?" Harry asked with a bit of a bite in his tenor. "To anybody." Harry looked at Goyle. "Yes, Greg, that means you."

"I'm just telling you, Harry," Goyle replied unperturbed, "that Malfoy wants to know something that's behind that scar of yours." Goyle cast another glance to Crabbe who seemed to be extremely uncomfortable. "I hear you and Malfoy have been pretty chummy lately. I just thought I should..."

"Chummy?" Harry replied in disbelief. "Why? Because we don't always hex each other in the back?" Goyle looked again at Crabbe who was now trembling with saucers for eyes.

"It seems," Goyle said slowly, "last night... in the dormitory..." Suddenly Crabbe squeaked saying nothing, and shaking his head violently. Goyle rolled his eyes. "Just be careful, Harry, that's all. You can't trust him, okay? Hell, you can't trust any of us," he said smiling and started up the stairs with Crabbe whispering something in his ear. Ron stayed back with Harry.

“What’s that all about?” Harry asked.

“Obviously, Crabbe knows something,” Ron shrugged, “but what it is, he’s not sayin’.” The two watched as Crabbe and Goyle disappeared into the castle. “You havin’ lunch?” Ron asked hopefully. Harry looked at Ron and then turned to look at Hagrid’s hut. The giant had gone inside and a thick white smoke was now billowing from the chimney. Harry set his back against the stone wall at the base of the steps offering only a sigh.

“You’re right, you know,” Ron said turning to the glassy lake. “You’re right to tell me to shove off. I deserve it.” Harry said nothing. He was resolute on this point and wasn’t going to change his opinion for anybody. Ron continued looking off across the lake his mind somewhere else. “I’m trying, Harry. I swear I’m trying.” Ron’s voice was uneven, and as Harry looked at him he could see a shudder pass over Ron’s body. “It’s just... this summer...”

“I told you, Ron,” Harry interrupted, “I don’t care what you and Hermione were doing for the war.” His voice was sharp and, as hard as he tried to the contrary, his words insincere.

“You don’t understand, Harry.” Ron began again. He closed his eyes as if gathering courage. “I told her I wouldn’t say,” he whispered. “But I can’t...” He turned to look back at Harry who was doing his best to be disinterested. “They... they beat her.” The words turned Harry immediately.

“What are you talking about, Ron?” he asked slowly a hint of concern in his words.

“This summer... in Germany... we were supposed to be back before dark, but we got lost. We found ourselves...” Ron began to shake and started walking away from the steps and out toward the lake. Harry followed. Ron began to clench his fists. “It’s all my fault,” he whispered. “I told her, ‘Just a few more minutes. They won’t care,’ and she listened. She never listens to me, but that night... that night she did.” They made their way to a barren tree at the side of the lake. The air was still and the sky gray.

“Two black guys and a white guy with a tattoo of a leopard across the right side of his face stopped us on the street. There were people walking everywhere, but no one paid any attention. No one!” Ron’s fists clenched again. He reached down and grabbed a rock throwing it far into the lake, and Harry wondered if he hadn’t heard Ron mutter the word Muggles. The splash sent ripples in a large circle toward every shore. “They started teasing us at first, circling like vultures. Miss Peacemaker, she whispered to ignore them, but the biggest and the darkest of the three caught her words.”

“‘English!’ he said in a German accent to one of his friends. ‘She did not say zey ver English.’ Then he walked toward her. ‘Oh, I don’t zink you’ll be able to ignore us sveetheart,’ he sneered putting his face close to hers. I couldn’t stand it and pulled my wand.”

“‘Ron, no!’ she yells at me.” Ron cast another rock into the lake sending larger swirls in every direction.

“Can you believe she was actually more worried about what would happen to me if I used my wand?” He gave another sigh, but it seemed to Harry a sigh of admiration. “But she couldn’t hear their thoughts, could she? I could: hatred, nothing but black-dark-hatred. I shouldn’t have listened to her... I knew better, but I... I hesitated. Damn it, I hesitated! Instantly, the other black guy slugs me in the face and plants me flat on my back, and I lost my wand. Leopard face holds a knife to my throat while the other two cornered her. She warned them, but they kept coming. Finally, she pulled her own wand.” Another rock flew into the lake just as a flock of geese started passing overhead in a large V-shaped pattern. It seemed to grow colder.

“There was a witch, or a wizard there, Harry,” said Ron looking over the surface of yet another stone and scraping some of the mud from its side, “there had to be. She didn’t hear the spell; I didn’t hear the spell, but her wand went flying through the air. Defenseless, she tried to push the guy in front of her away with her hands and... and he slapped her. The guy over me begins to laugh, ‘I zink she liked zat,’ he said drooling. They slapped her again.” Ron continued to clean a spot on the stone that was already starting to take on a dull luster.

“She tried to let out a scream for help when the smaller guy grabs her throat. I heard her choking when...” Ron dropped the stone and sat to the ground pulling up dead grass. “All I could see was red, Harry.” He looked up at his best friend, and a tear streaked down the right side of his face. “Red... and black,” he hissed.

“The guy over me dropped his knife and stared at his hand, and then... then he began to scream. He fell to his knees shrieking and holding his hand. I stood up and the two black guys beating her were now on their knees, reaching for their throats. They were silent... dead silent. She yelled at me to stop, but I was in their heads listening to the screams they couldn’t make. ‘Scream you bastards!’ I thought. She slapped me across the face, and they fell to the ground, gasping for air.”

“We grabbed our wands and we ran. We ran until we finally found a street that looked familiar. By the time we found our way back, we had sworn not to tell anybody.” Ron looked at Harry. “Since I first rode the Hogwarts express, it was the only time I’ve ever used magic without a wand.” Ron looked at his two hands. “And I almost killed them, Harry. If she hadn’t...” There was a long pause. This time Harry picked up a stone and tossed it in the lake. It too sent out rings on the still water.

“Now,” Ron whispered, “when I see Dean with Ginny...” Again he shuddered looking to the ground. “I know it’s insane, Harry. I know Dean’s a great guy and all, but... I’m trying, Harry; you’ve got to know that.” Ron stood to his feet holding a new rock in his hand and ignoring the dried grass clinging to his robes. “You’ve got to.” He tossed the stone in the water and the ripples intersected the rings emanating from Harry’s toss. The two shapes formed a spider web across the lake that slowly made its way to shore causing a little wave that splashed on the lake’s edge at their feet.

Harry had questions, lots of questions, but he knew the answers would come without him asking. Perhaps, he hoped, the invisible wall was beginning to crumble. He looked out across the lake toward Hogsmeade, took in a deep breath, and slowly let it out.

"Let's eat," he said to Ron. "I'm starved aren't you?" The thinnest hint of a smile crossed Ron's face and he nodded.

The clouds broke as the two friends made their way back to the castle, and the sun cast a yellow glow against the castle walls. A glint off one of the upper story windows caught Harry in the eye and, squinting, he looked up. The gray clouds closed together, and Harry saw a figure standing at the window in the Gryffindor common room staring back down at the pair.

"Merlin's beard!" he yelled, picking up the pace. Ron saw that he was looking up at the castle.

"What is it?" he asked keeping pace with Harry and looking up himself. "What do you see?"

"That idiot Neville let her in again!" Harry called out. "You do know, Prefect, he's been sneaking Helen Hedera into the Gryffindor common room?"

"He can't do that!" Ron yelled starting to breathe hard as they ascended the steps. "I just changed the password!"

"He's been doing it all year when nobody's around." Harry started up the moving staircase. "Before breakfast... after hours... and I guess now, lunch." They moved through the portrait of the Fat Lady and made their way into common room. The room was empty. They searched everywhere, but found no one.

"Are you sure you saw..." Ron began.

"Yes, I'm sure," Harry breathed. "I even saw the flower in her hair." He dropped back into an overstuffed chair rubbing his forehead. His head was aching.

"Look," Ron said, "I've got to clean these robes. They're covered in grass. Maybe we can catch them in the Great Hall." He disappeared up the stairs to the boys' dormitory. Harry sat trying to turn Ron's story over in his head.

"It had to be Hermione," he thought holding his arm over his eyes and trying to stop his head from pounding. Suddenly he heard Ron give a short muffled yell.

"Ron?" he yelled up the stairs. There was no answer. "Ron!" He ran up the stairs, turned into his own dormitory, and banged heads with Tonks. They both fell to the ground. Harry was seeing stars, his vision blurred.

"Come on, mate," Ron said lifting him to his feet as Tonks slowly stood.

"Harry, are you okay?" she asked rubbing the side of her head. Harry blinked his eyes hard as his head began to clear.

"What... what's wrong?" he asked, his head searing with pain.

"Nothing," said Tonks with a smile as she rubbed her own head. "I just came to get this." In her hand was the Walkman Harry had borrowed. "My little sister's going to try flying on an airplane tomorrow, and I thought she might enjoy listening to some music. I figured it'd be pretty quiet at lunch and I didn't want to draw a lot of attention." She reached over to Harry holding out her wand. He took a step back as a beam of blue-green light sprung forth toward the knot that was growing on his forehead. The pain between his temples receded.

"I only saw Neville," Tonks continued, putting her wand away and stroking a wisp of hair behind Harry's ear. "He was more interested in getting off to lunch it seemed."

"Did you see Helen Hedera?" Ron asked. "Was she with Neville?"

"No," Tonks said shaking her head. "But I came up here before Neville left." Tonks squinted her eyes at Ron. "Isn't she in Hufflepuff?" she asked. Ron shot Harry a glance.

"She's usually waiting for Neville outside the portrait," Harry replied not wanting to get Neville in that much trouble, at least not yet. "They've become... close." At his words, Tonks grinned.

“Well,” Tonks said starting for the stairs. “I must be going. Class with the first years is going to start soon.” As she descended she called back, “I’ll see you tonight, Harry.” He adjusted his glasses and sighed remembering his requisite detention.

“He must have gone past us in the corridor,” Ron said shaking the grass of his robes and clearing the droppings with his wand. “They probably ducked behind that suit of armor or down at the side alcove when they saw us coming.”

When Ron and Harry entered the Great Hall for lunch, sure enough, Neville and Helen were eating side-by-side at the Hufflepuff table. Helen had a bright red rose in her hair. When Neville saw the two he smiled and waved. Ron, however, was none to pleased. He stomped over to the two of them.

“You know I can put you both in detention for sneaking in like that. Dumbledore may be letting the houses mix more, but the common rooms are off limits.”

“I’m sorry Ron,” Helen said sincerely, but with a slight look of confusion. “It’s my fault, I just asked to see what it was like is all, and Neville... well he’s just a sweetie.” She grinned and kissed him on the cheek. The sight of someone kissing Neville Longbottom was a bit more than Ron could take, and his anger evaporated.

“Well... don’t let it happen again,” he snapped but the bite in his words was gone.

While Ron was tearing into Neville and Helen, Harry couldn’t help but hold his eyes on Helen. Something was wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. When Ron came back to the table where he was sitting, the thought swirling in the back of his mind vanished.

After lunch, the pair made their way to Transfiguration, Ron talking the whole while about the previous night’s practice that Harry had missed. “Colin showed us some of the picture show he put together,” Ron said excitedly. “He’s an awful Seeker, but you’ll get the idea. Ravenclaw won’t know what hit ‘em.” He was grinning and Harry grinned back. As the two entered class, Hermione looked up just in

time to see them both smiling. Ron gave Harry a nod and walked to Hermione while Harry sat down next to Malfoy.

The blonde was writing on some parchment, but as Harry sat, he quickly rolled it up and put it into his pack. "Hey Potter," he drawled. "I thought you'd had it with that low life." Malfoy looked at Ron, and then back to his Transfiguration partner. Harry was about to speak when Professor McGonagall walked briskly into the classroom.

"Take your places," she called across the room. Minutes later, the class began to transfigure cats into dogs and back again. "One must feel the transition of transfiguring one life force into another," Professor McGonagall said to the class. "The energy is there, and the mind's eye must see what the goal is." She walked around the room. Anthony Goldstein was only able to transfigure his cat from a tabby to a calico. The early attempts around the class that were failing caused a lot of laughter. "It will be much harder," Professor McGonagall continued, "to create the illusion of life, where before it did not exist." The laughter and commotion increased in the room, but Malfoy's eyes were steel and his expression stoic.

"Well?" Malfoy turned to Harry, his voice low. "I know we couldn't talk about it in detention last night. That insufferable Professor Tonks refused to leave us alone." He looked around to ensure no one was looking. "Do you have your answer?"

"You seemed to like the extra lessons last night well enough," Harry quipped, focusing his wand at the cat before him. "Gaperro!" he called out. A flash of light hit his gray tabby and it began to change into a miniature schnauzer, only its fur was still very much cat-like and its tail long and ringed. Harry sighed. "Pegatto." The tabby returned and he slid it over to Malfoy.

"Tell me Draco," Harry said in a low voice. "Have you spoken of this to anyone?" Malfoy looked at him intently and cast his own spell on the cat. His first attempts had been more successful. This time, only the head transfigured. Malfoy scowled. "Something wrong, Draco?"

"I hate snitches," Malfoy drawled. "There's no room for them in Slytherin." He transfigured the creature back into a cat and roughly shoved it over to Harry. The cat meowed in pain.

"Unless, of course," Harry added scratching the cat behind the ears and getting it to calm, "it serves their own purpose. Isn't that the Slytherin way? Loyalty last?"

"You know nothing of what it means to be in Slytherin," Malfoy hissed. "You'll never know. So pure, so perfect, so... so Potter." Malfoy slumped in his chair, but then a smile crossed his face and he leaned in next to Harry tapping the scar on his face. "But you're not so pure, are you, Potter?" Harry said nothing. "Let's talk about snitches. I hear you've been playing Cho off another girl. Am I right?" Again, Harry said nothing, but the blood drained from his face and his insides went cold. He didn't need to say a word; Malfoy now knew the answer.

"Who is she, Potter?" he drawled. "Not Granger?" Harry clenched his wand, his knuckles white, and pointed it the tiny tabby before him. It was all he could do not to blast Malfoy across the room. His hands were shaking. "Gaperro!" he yelled. A blast of light erupted from his wand and the tabby began to grow. Its cute button nose slowly turned snout-like. The tiny feet grew into pads the size of Harry's own hand. Before them was a dog some four feet tall, dark black, with large fangs and fierce green eyes. Drool dribbled down from its mouth onto Malfoy's hand. It was he, who now was shaking. The dog eyed him contemptuously.

"I don't think he liked you shoving him at me like that," Harry said sharply through his teeth. He was still angry, but had felt some of the anger leave him. He looked at the dog and realized he was looking at the very likeness of his godfather.

"Sirius?" Harry whispered. The dog paid him no attention. Malfoy was pushing backward in his chair away from the dog when it pounced.

The class, which had stood in dumbfounded silence to this point, let out a collective scream. All except Ron who yelled, "Get him boy!" Malfoy fell backward in his chair and turned on his belly to escape,

when the dog landed squarely on his back, knocking the wind out of him.

“Help!” he gasped. Clawing to get away, but unable to move. “Get it off! Get it off!” Warm drool ran down onto the back of his neck as the dog’s huge nostrils sniffed for where he’d take the first bite. Wisps of blonde hair flew into the air with each snort. Malfoy’s legs were kicking as Harry held his wand high. Professor McGonagall was running from the front of the class as the door slowly opened.

“Pegatto!” Harry called out. The dog instantly shrunk back into its original form. A small gray tabby scratching at the blonde locks at the back of Malfoy’s neck.

“Get it off!” Malfoy screamed again apparently unaware of the transfiguration. “Help me please!” he begged. The site was comical. Malfoy spread-eagle on the floor begging for help from the vicious tabby kitten on the back of his neck. The class began to laugh.

At the door, a deep sneering voice bellowed out. “Get off the ground, Mr. Malfoy.” The laughter and the reverberation shocked Malfoy to his senses and brought him back to the present. Suddenly, putting it together, he reached up and grabbed the cat.

“Don’t you hurt a hair on that kitten’s head, Malfoy!” Hermione yelled from across the room. Looking around he placed the kitten on the floor and stood up wiping the drool off his neck, and trying to straighten his robes.

“May I help you Professor?” Professor McGonagall asked, irritated at the commotion and the intrusion.

“I’ve come for Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter, Minerva,” Professor Snape said with eyes that could spit fire. “I thought class was over.” Professor McGonagall glanced at a large hourglass by her desk. The sand had run out.

“Indeed it is, Severus,” she replied. “Class dismissed. Harry, Draco, please stay behind for a moment.” The class exited, although Ron and Hermione seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time.

"I'm sure you'll hear all about it, you two," Professor McGonagall chided. "Now be on your way!" Dejected, they left the classroom leaving the two students and the two professors alone. Malfoy was still trying to wipe the slime off his neck.

"Sit down you two," Professor Snape commanded. He looked around to ensure the door was shut. Harry reached for a chair, but Malfoy shoved him aside and took the same one. Harry was about to take action when Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. Looking up, he saw her eyes flash him a look that said 'sit down', and he took the next chair and sat. Turning another chair to face them, Snape sat as well, and then began to speak very slowly and deliberately. "I think we all know there is certain amount of, shall we say, animosity between the two of you." Malfoy's eyes narrowed on Harry and he let out a low huff. "A danger now faces you both." They both looked at him confused. "For you, Draco, it is a temptation that could lead you to ruin. For you, Harry, it might mean your very life." Now even Professor McGonagall was perplexed as she leaned in closer trying to understand his words.

Professor Snape stood, walked behind his chair, and looked back at the two boys. "Lucius Malfoy, Augustus Rockwood, and Selaton Nott have escaped from Azkaban." Harry slumped in his chair and shook his head. Malfoy first looked to Harry, and shot him glance he hadn't expected--fear. But when he turned back to face Professor Snape his look was confident, almost smug.

"I knew he'd be back," he smirked. "Now you'll pay. You'll all pay."

Chapter 33 - Dealing with the Snake

The night outside Hogwarts Castle was clear and cold, but news of tomorrow's expected storm was well known to all. Three feet of new snow was forecasted and already the wind had begun to pick up, howling around the castle like dozens of wolves calling to the moon. Inside, the castle was abuzz with activity. Storm-proof signs and banners were being made in preparation of tomorrow's big match--the first Quidditch tournament of the year between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. With the fall of darkness over the pitch, the teams had retreated indoors to discuss strategies and last minute changes. Nearly everyone was focused on the tomorrow's match. Harry, however, was focused on the eleven and one-half inch yew wand now pointing directly at his face.

Except for the handful of candles flickering above the desk, all was dark. Harry's face was cast in silhouette as the same light glinted off the gray in Malfoy's eyes.

"There's no way you'll deflect this Potter," he sneered. "Your time has finally come to an end. What will Gryffindor do without the great Harry Potter as Seeker?"

"Win," Harry said without hesitation. His green eyes looked intently for the first hint of Malfoy's spell.

"Let's finish where we left off, shall we?" Balancing the wand with his thumb, Malfoy, ever so slightly, stroked the shaft of yew with his thumb. It was the signal Harry had come to expect. Before the words left Malfoy's mouth, Harry pulled his wand from his pocket.

"Where we left off?" Harry thought to himself as he raised his own wand. Then he remembered. He knew what Malfoy's spell was to be, but where to deflect it? He decided on the stone fireplace as Malfoy cast the spell.

"Incendio!"

"Protego!"

The spells were uttered almost instantaneously and Malfoy's spell deflected to the fireplace. The logs, already burning, exploded in fury. The heat was intense, but quickly diminished. Malfoy cursed.

"You're lucky, Potter!" Malfoy snapped dejectedly. "Lucky!"

"I told you two to keep the hexes simple!" Tonks called out. She sat at her desk in the front of the classroom grading parchments.

"Just needed a bit more light Professor." Malfoy grinned; he seemed to actually be enjoying himself.

"Okay, Mr. Malfoy," said Tonks still looking down at her papers. "I believe Mr. Potter's now three up on you out of seventeen. Place your wand in your pocket and hold your hands high. Should you again reach down before the sign is seen, you will again lose five points from your house." And then her voice became more intense. "Look for the move, Draco. When they think they have the upper hand, every wizard has one. It's the pre-spell warm-up that signals their intent."

"Yes, yes, Professor," said Malfoy with a sigh having already heard these lines before. "Allowed only to act on instinct, the wizard's spell will be quicker. Let them think they have the advantage and, if you know what to look for, they can be beaten."

"Very good, Mr. Malfoy," she said, trying not to smile. "But have you seen what it is that Mr. Potter does before he casts his spell?" At these words, Malfoy's carriage drooped; he didn't know. "Think, Draco. He holds his wand at the ready and..." Malfoy thought hard. They'd blasted each other over a dozen times tonight, but on the last three Harry had seen something in Malfoy's movement and now was deflecting his spells at will. In his mind, Malfoy went through Harry's motions and then, suddenly, saw it. A grin spread across his face and he held his hands in the air.

"Nothing too painful, Potter," he drawled. "I do so want to cheer for Ravenclaw tomorrow."

"Yes, Mr. Potter," Tonks echoed. "I want no trips to the hospital ward tonight."

Harry held his wand at the ready and pointed it at Malfoy's face. As was the required routine, he needed to say something, but he was running out of good lines. His mind turned the morning's news in his head and his face turned grim.

"So, Draco," he said in a solemn tone. "You've come to save your father. You know I cannot let you pass." The words put Malfoy off center for only an instant.

"I'm not here for my father, Potter," he scoffed. "I'm here for you." Malfoy's steel eyes stared intently into Harry's green. He was saying something more, something hidden from Tonks, but there for Harry to find. Harry narrowed his eyes and began to cast the spell.

"Petrificus..."

"Expelliarmus!" Malfoy rang out, wand in hand. Harry's wand, to the contrary, shot backwards towards Tonks' desk. Slowly, she left her seat and winced as she reached down to pick it up.

"Excellent, Malfoy!" She smiled and handed Harry his wand. "Excellent. The secret is almost always in the eyes. Almost." She walked back to her desk and Harry noted that the limp that had been gone earlier in the day had returned.

"Professor," Harry spoke with a hint of concern, "is everything okay?" She leaned against her desk and looked back at Harry. Her face was unusually grim, almost frightened.

"No, Harry," she said bleakly. "Everything is not okay. The Dark Lord and his minions grow stronger every day. Like rats, they're multiplying exponentially. We catch a handful at every attack and they double in size. And now," she looked at Malfoy, "old allies are returning." Malfoy looked away. "The choices we make in the weeks, the days, to come will be crucial." She sighed deeply and sat down at her desk.

"As for me, Harry," she offered a thin smile, "I'm fine." Then looking at the desk before her. "But, I have far too many papers to read and I'm

sure you both have other places you'd rather be. Your detentions are finished. You can go."

Harry hesitated as Tonks took a parchment and began reading. Malfoy grabbed his arm, tugging him toward the door. Harry looked at Malfoy who was motioning him to leave and then to Tonks. She had tried to heal herself, but her powers were failing somehow. Malfoy tugged again, and this time Harry acquiesced.

Malfoy was beaming as the two emerged into the corridor. The light was bright and Harry's eyes needed a moment to adjust. "She's brilliant," said Malfoy catching Harry off guard. "Shall we get into detention next week?"

"Something's wrong," Harry said, concerned about Tonks. They were halfway down the first corridor when Malfoy glanced around and pulled a distracted Harry into an empty classroom.

"Well, Harry?" he asked, finally having Harry to himself. "You heard what she said, didn't you? We need to act now." His words were intense, and his eyes afire. "You're a fool, do you know that? You're worrying about tomorrow's match, when our hour is at hand! Where are your priorities, man?" Harry looked at Malfoy, his own eyes intense.

"What is it you're really after, Draco?" he asked. "Will you turn to your father when he returns? Or, am I already speaking to Lucius right now?" Malfoy's nostrils flared, his contempt palpable.

"His escape changes nothing," he spat. "He's still imprisoned, only he doesn't know it." Malfoy turned his back on Harry and began to pace the room. "Tell me Harry, when does my precious father show his head again? Not at the Ministry's Christmas party. There will be no more cocktails with Mr. Fudge, no more friends for tea and caviar." He turned and looked at Harry. "Only more secret meetings at night, in the darkness, after all have gone to bed." Malfoy, uncharacteristically, ran his fingers through his hair.

"Do you know how many friends have come to visit my mother since father went away? Do you?" he yelled. Harry said nothing. He had

very little pity for the Malfoy family, and all the tears in the world weren't going to change that. But, Malfoy wasn't crying; his tears had dried up long ago. Malfoy sat in a chair rubbing his hands in broad circles on the large oak desk in front of him as if examining the wood's grain.

"She sits alone at night and wonders if he'll come back. She actually believes he can come back! But for that to happen, we both know who needs to win the war, don't we?" For a moment Malfoy's hands stopped, clutching the edge of the desk as if gathering strength. He shrieked, and heaved the desk over onto its side. Harry's eyes widened and he stepped back. Malfoy, standing over the scattered papers, turned once more to his nemesis.

"The Dark Lord can never win, Harry. He'll ruin us all." Malfoy stepped closer. "But neither can Dumbledore, can he?" He stepped closer again. "If either had the advantage, it would have been over last year, at the Ministry. Don't you see? They can't win." He paused, putting his hand on Harry's arm. "But we can."

Harry stood speechless. Malfoy's rant was truer than he could know. He was offering up all he knew of Voldemort's pieces, maybe more. There they were, waiting for Harry to open his hand and pick them up. But was this the unity that Dumbledore had spoken of? He had to be sure.

"You have much to offer, Draco," Harry finally whispered, "and much to gain." Harry now held Malfoy's arm. "Tell me, what do you have to lose?" The question was unexpected.

"What do you mean?" Malfoy asked.

"If I betray your confidence... what might happen?"

"I would be killed," Malfoy said simply. Harry shook his head and squeezed his arm. Malfoy took no notice.

"You're a Slytherin, Draco. If your life were on the line, I'd see it in your eyes. What do you have to lose?" he repeated, his voice hard.

Malfoy's expression opened up. The look Harry had seen in Malfoy's eyes when Professor Snape had told him of Lucius' escape returned.

"Everything, Potter," he whispered. "Everything."

"That's what you say, but what I hear is that this is all a grand plot of yours." Harry said walking away. "A strategy to lure me in." This time Malfoy laughed.

"The pieces on the board know my position, Potter. They think they do, anyway. They also know yours. It is imperative that we maintain that... that illusion."

"Then I need a sign," Harry said again, intently looking into Malfoy's eyes.

"A sign?"

"A demonstration of your... sincerity," Harry explained. "I don't trust you, Malfoy. However we work this out, it's going to go slow. I need to know you're not going to strike me in the back. Your life may not be at risk, but mine is."

"Then you'll do it!" Malfoy grinned eagerly, and then he began to stare into space thinking intently. "A proper demonstration will take time." And then his eyes returned to the Gryffindor before him. "If we do this... I need your word you're in... in it all the way."

"You know my way, Draco, and I know yours. It's oil and water, and it doesn't mix."

"We'll just have to shake things up a bit then, won't we?"

Harry stepped close to the blonde and whispered, "Draco, you have my word that I'll do whatever it takes to defeat Voldemort."

Malfoy stepped in close and held open his hand. "And you, Harry, have mine."

For a moment, Harry hesitated. Thoughts of knowledge and power filled his head. "Where's room for love?" he thought to himself. Was this the only way? Was this the best way? He took a deep breath, and firmly held Malfoy's hand in his own. "I await your demonstration, Draco."

Late that night, laying in bed in the boys' dormitory, the conversations were entirely on Quidditch. One by one, all the Gryffindors fell asleep. All, that is, except Harry. His mind was filled with the opportunities that Malfoy might bring to the table. He'd only glanced at Colin's moving pictures, but then he didn't need to do much. The strategy was simple, but with Ron as Keeper, Harry thought, unnecessary.

"If he knew where Voldemort's hiding," he whispered to the darkness. He heard Goyle stir. In silence, Harry's mind spun on.

If he knew who at the Ministry were spies... the tide could change, and the veil of fear might be lifted. With Voldemort gone, Harry could begin anew with Gabriella. She'd be safe again, and together they'd be free to take on life together. The next instant, he thought of Cho, and his stomach lurched as he turned on his side. Every time he made an effort to talk with her, to tell her the truth, he was denied. They had grown comfortable in each other's arms. They had found warmth in each other's smiles. But when Harry's thoughts turned to the possibility of a future, that future always included Gabriella.

"Gabriella," he whispered, his hand flat on the bed beside him. He had written her every week. Perhaps they weren't directly connected with a beam of energy, but Hedwig was a close substitute. In his last letter, he had considered telling her of the mirrors, but dismissed it. He turned onto his back, his hands behind his head, and stared at the dimly lit ceiling. At last, he began to clear his mind. His last thoughts were on the demonstration to come, a demonstration that could seal his fate and the Wizarding World's future.

He woke with a start, panting, his breath shallow and his heart pounding, droplets of perspiration running down his face. He felt as if he'd been running, but he wasn't afraid. He wasn't running away, he was chasing somebody, or something. One thought lingered in his

mind: water. He wiped his brow with his forearm, sat up, and looked out the window. It was covered in frost, and the morning still dark.

"It's time to get up," a voice whispered from behind. Harry jumped. Goyle was sitting up in bed, reading by candlelight. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Harry answered, still off balance. "What are you doing up so early?" he asked. Goyle's face, lit with the single flickering candle, smiled wearily.

"I never went to sleep."

"Greg, the match is today, and..."

"And I have far too much homework," he interrupted. "After we win today, tonight's going to be one long party," he said grinning, "and I'm not going to wait until tomorrow." He returned to his book. "Whoever dreamed that Muggle Studies could be so difficult? Without the help of Hermione and Dean, I'd be sunk." Goyle looked over at Ron's bed. "Don't tell him, but Ron's worthless." Harry looked at the redhead across the room still snoring lightly.

"I'll bet he already knows," he whispered. He wiped his face with both hands and stood. The room seemed to tilt a little. Harry walked over to Goyle's bed. "You know I live with Muggles. Why didn't you ask me?" A dim light was seeping in through the dormitory window, and Goyle put the candle on his desk and blew it out. He set his book down and stood. A good foot taller than Harry, he looked down and simply shook his head giving a snicker. He grabbed a towel and started for the showers. Harry grabbed his own towel and followed.

"What's with the laugh," Harry asked, a bit put off. "I know you know..."

"From what I've heard around here, Harry," Goyle interrupted, "you spent ten years locked in a cupboard with the most vile Muggles imaginable. Once they were sure you were a wizard, it wasn't much better. I hardly think you're a poster child for the Muggle way of life.

At least, I hope you're not. Otherwise, my dad's been right all along." The words, like the shower's water, were cold and biting.

"The Halloween he killed your parents and you vanquished him, however you did it, Harry Potter became the most famous wizard in the world," Goyle continued, washing his head. "I knew your name before I knew Dumbledore's." He looked at Harry. "Everyone in Slytherin thinks you, like Draco, are a spoiled brat, brought up with only the best. After all, when You-Know-Who killed your parents, any Wizarding family would have taken you in. You should have grown up with the best of everything and instead you have ten-plus years of torture to look back on." Goyle finished and grabbed his towel. "That's what your precious Dumbledore did for you--ten years of hell. Thanks, Harry, but I'll get my Muggle Studies help elsewhere."

As Goyle left, Harry remained silent, not bothering to adjust the cold water splashing his head and running down to the floor. He began to shiver, but not because of the cold. What did he really know about Muggles? He'd spent only one month with Gabriella and thought he knew what it might mean to be a Muggle and be happy for the rest of his life. He leaned his head against the shower wall, the water running down his back.

"Ten years of torture," he whispered to himself. And what had the years at Hogwarts been like? He thought of his detentions with Umbridge, the deaths of Sirius and Cedric, the attacks of Dementors and Basilisks. Against his will, he felt his mind forcing him to think of his parents and all he had lost. Tears began to trickle down his face. "Sixteen years of hell."

"Harry? Harry, what is it?" Ron had entered the showers. Harry spun immediately.

"Were you just..." he spat, pointing to his own head.

"No!" Ron answered immediately, holding out his hands. "I swear." For an instant, Harry glared at Ron, then splashed his face with the water and grabbed his towel.

“I’m the same as ever, Ron,” Harry said weakly, realizing he had been wrestling with his own mind. “Whatever that means.”

At breakfast, the Great Hall was frenetic about the day’s match. Laughter filled the room, and everyone seemed to be smiling. It was the most positive energy Harry had seen in these walls all year. Even in near blizzard conditions, Wizards had been arriving all morning to find the best seats, and word had gotten out that the scouts from the Chudley Cannons and the Tutshill Tornados were in attendance. Ron was beside himself with excitement. Harry had been slapped on his back so many times it was starting to ache. Helen Hedera, a scarlet red iris in her hair, walked over to the Gryffindor table and kissed Neville good-luck. Everyone howled.

“I take it you’re playing Chaser today, eh, Neville?” Ron joked. Neville just sat silently waving back to Helen as she sat down. “I think she’s taken his mind!” he said with a laugh.

“She’s taken his heart,” said Hermione and smiled.

For the first time in weeks, Ron, Harry, and Hermione sat down to eat breakfast together. It was an opportunity to share some laughs for a change, but Harry’s mind was not at Hogwarts. It had run down the shower drain and was on its way out to the lake. His face was anything but a smile. Hermione, sitting directly across from him turned from Helen to see his blank stare.

“Harry, what’s wrong?” Hermione asked. Slowly, he looked at her with dead eyes.

“Potter! Weasleys!” Katie yelled from down the table. “Finish up, we need to get ready!” Having taken only one bite of toast, Harry pushed his plate forward.

“I’m finished,” he said. He stood to answer Katie’s call. The looks his friends were giving him, he had come to know. They were concerned and questioning, but they too had known Harry long enough not to ask. Ron, sitting next to Ginny, still had food on his plate and gave Harry a half-wave.

“Be there in a bit, mate,” he mumbled munching on a muffin. Harry tossed his hand in the air and started to leave.

Even here, among all these people, he was feeling alone again. He looked to the ceiling and sighed. The roof of the Great Hall was white with snow, and the wind whistled around the windows. It would be cold on the pitch today.

“Good luck, Harry!” a voice called out. James Chang, sitting with a group of first years, was smiling and waving. Harry tried to smile back, but couldn’t. He felt empty inside, like a great darkness had swallowed him whole. The emptiness had left a vacuum into which thoughts of who he was, and what his future might be came rushing in.

“Why am I here,” he thought once again. He scanned the room at all the happy faces and felt so very out of place. Was he ever really happy here? He couldn’t remember. Dumbledore said he was here to learn. Somehow, at this instant, it felt so pointless. “Learn what?” he breathed as he turned to leave.

As he made his way out of the Great Hall, he saw something that he had not expected. Cho Chang was walking in to breakfast. Marietta was at her side, holding her left arm, but Cho was walking. Harry’s heart skipped, his eyes widened, a great light shone onto his soul, and a smile broke out upon his face. He ran over to her, and grabbed her in his arms.

“Look at you!” he yelled, holding her arms out wide and then hugging her close again. “I knew you could do it,” he whispered. He looked into her eyes and kissed her. “I knew it.” He squeezed her tight, buried his head into her shoulder and suddenly began to sob. “I knew it.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Harry,” she whispered back into his ear. Harry took a deep breath and looked at her smiling face, her eyes looking up into his. Students, exiting the Great Hall, began to stream around them.

"You're amazing, you know that don't you?" he sniffed wiping his face. "You'll be flying in the next match."

"One step at a time, Harry," she said, and wiped his face with her hand. "One step at a time. Right now, I'm hungry." She took a step, teetered, and Marietta, herself all smiles, held Cho's arm again. "If you hear someone screaming 'Down with Gryffindor!' today, that'll be me. Hope you don't mind." With her free hand she stroked his face.

"If you're standing, you can cheer for whoever you want!" Harry beamed. Slowly, Cho and Marietta disappeared into the Great Hall and the deafening sound of cheers and applause. Just then, Ron emerged with Ginny and Jack Sloper.

"You're late!" Harry called. "Katie will be a dragon!"

"And she isn't already?" asked Ron.

As they were about to enter the Gryffindor locker room, Sloper became a bit uncomfortable.

"Well," he said, "er... good luck." He turned to the corridor leading to the stands when Harry stopped him.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To cheer you on," Jack replied, trying to muster a smile.

"You're on the team, right?" Harry asked and Jack nodded. "Then you'll suit up with the rest of us! You'll fly to the pitch with the rest of us, spin out and cheer in uniform from the side. If one of us goes down, you're in." Sloper's smile grew wide as Ron patted him on the back and they entered the locker room.

Just before the game, Katie covered the last minute details. Her eyes had a somewhat crazed look to them as she attempted to give the team a last minute pep talk.

"Visibility is zero," she said. "Potter will be lucky to see the Snitch long enough to catch it. There's no way he'll see our signs." Harry sighed

in relief knowing he hadn't really studied the signals that much anyway. "It's a Chaser's game," she said looking at Ginny and Dennis. The Bludgers can see through snow, so stay alert. "Geoffrey. Greg. Keep them off our backs as best you can." Dennis, the smallest on the team, looked nervous. To the contrary, Ron looked calm and unconcerned.

"Catch it as soon as you can, mate," Ron whispered at his side. "They're not scorin' on me today and I don't want us out there any longer than we need to be."

The door to the pitch opened. "Doin' okay there, Dennis?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Dennis' voice quivered.

"Don't worry." Harry grinned as the snow began to blow into the locker room. "I was nervous my first time too."

"What happened?" Dennis asked mounting his broom.

"Not much," said Harry smiling as he mounted his Caduceus. "Voldemort took possession of one of the professors and he jinxed my broom from the top row. I nearly fell off and died." Harry slapped Dennis on the shoulder, and he and the rest of team flew out. Madame Hooch, wearing goggles and a fur cap, whistled for them all to huddle close so she could see them.

"I want a clean match today!" she yelled, the snow was blowing sideways in the wind. Harry could see the Ravenclaw's, but couldn't distinguish one from the other. She released the balls and tossed the Quaffle.

The game was on.

On the Caduceus, Harry was warm at least. His glasses were dry, but he still couldn't see more than a few feet to either side, and the wind was howling so loud he could barely hear the crowd below. "This is impossible," he whispered to himself. He tried, as best he could, to fly along the outer edge of the pitch. He had a good sense for how long

it took to fly from one side to the other. His plan was to fly high, through the center, and hopefully not run in to anybody. With luck he might stumble across the Snitch.

On his first pass through the center, Dennis zipped by, missing his head by only inches. He was beaming as he held the Quaffle in his hand.

"Hey, Harry!" he yelled his voice fading into the distance as he disappeared into the snow. With a whoosh, two Ravenclaws passed by giving chase. Seconds later there was an eruption of applause; Dennis had scored. When Harry reached Ron, he found the redhead shivering, but smiling.

"That's sixty to nothing!" Ron yelled. Harry had missed the first two scores. "Have you seen it?"

"I can't see anything!" Harry yelled back. Suddenly Ron's attention shifted. He slipped quickly from the center ring, and moved to the ring on his right. Harry could barely see Ron, never mind any Ravenclaw coming to score. Suddenly, he saw the Quaffle zooming toward the right ring's center, but Ron twisted his broom and smacked it away.

"Catch, the bloody thing!" Ron yelled. "I'm cold."

Again Harry streaked down the center. Suddenly his arm burst with pain. Without knowing why, he turned his broom to the right, just as a Bludger brushed his shoulder. Goyle was right behind, and smacked it toward the far end of the pitch.

"Are you crazy!" Goyle yelled at Harry. "Stay to the east of the pitch, I'll tell Hooper, and we'll make sure the Bludgers stay west." Harry was going to argue, when Goyle disappeared into the snow.

His arm ached, but he moved to the east. He was just as likely to see the Snitch there as anywhere else. Ginny swooped past with Katie close behind holding the Quaffle. Moments later, there was another eruption of cheers buried in the howling wind. Harry moved quickly up and down the east side of the pitch for what seemed like an hour. He could hear occasional cheers, but didn't bother to check on the score.

He was confident Ron had everything in control as Keeper. His single goal was to find the Snitch and end the match before they all froze to death.

A familiar hum passed his ear and his heart leapt. A second later, he ducked just in time to avoid being hit by Les Bowers, a third year, and Ravenclaw's new Seeker. Harry cursed under his breath. Les was fast and agile. Harry was sure Gryffindor was ahead, but was it more than one-hundred-fifty points? In an instant, he was speeding toward Les and the Snitch. He easily caught Les, but finding the Snitch was more difficult. He couldn't see it, but he could hear the hum fade in and out in the wind. The Snitch was trying to climb high into the wind. They were moving west, and moving fast. The wind eased, and suddenly the Snitch dived low. Both Seekers slipped toward the ground, neither knowing how close they were to disaster. Les pulled back, but Harry plunged forward. He'd missed the Bludger on instinct; he'd know when he was close to the ground.

The Snitch leveled and sped forward, but Harry was now with it at every turn, the Caduceus responding instantly. "Faster!" he thought, and the Caduceus responded. Rocketing through the air, he sat high on his broom and reached up to grab the Snitch when, for an instant, everything suddenly went scarlet. He was off his broom, and was falling to the ground, someone falling with him. His mind was on the Snitch and how close he was. He looked down and saw the ground. He hit. They'd only dropped some fifteen feet, two feet of snow cushioning their fall. Harry smiled to himself as the driving snow began to lighten. He sat up, when he tasted something warm and salty in his mouth. He looked up and saw the people in the stands coming into view, but then his vision began to fade. He was suddenly cold, very cold. A figure lifted itself off the pitch and walked over to him. It was Greg Goyle.

"I'm sorry, Harry, he said reaching down to give Harry his hand. "Are you..." he stopped. His face looked odd, Harry thought. He was going to grab Goyle's hand when he realized he was holding onto a broom. He looked down to find his hands holding the stock of Goyle's Nimbus 2001 near the bristles. The point had pierced Harry's chest and proceeded out his back. In the snow around Harry, a large ring began to expand outwards. Its color matched his scarlet flying robes.

“Oh,” Harry gurgled unable to breathe. He could hear the screams as wizards were racing toward him, their footsteps muffled in the white powder. He fell stiff on his side. “I almost had it,” he thought to himself, and everything was black.

Chapter 34 - First of the Number

The circle of blood spread out in an ever-growing ring around Harry's body. He lay lifeless on his side, pierced through the chest by Goyle's Nimbus 2001. Like a statue, the giant Slytherin stood frozen, dumbstruck as the red seeped around his boots. The Hufflepuff students sitting in the lower west tier were first to arrive. Taylor Smythe, a seventh year, ran to help, but when he saw the ring of blood, he wouldn't pass. Horrified at the sight, he began to step backward as the blood oozed toward him. Ron was the first Gryffindor at the scene.

"Take it out of him Goyle!" he screamed. Goyle pulled out his wand, and pointed it at the broom in Harry's chest.

"STOP!" a high voice yelled. Madame Guérir was running through the snow clutching a small box in her hand. "Don't touch anything!" She was as white as the snow, her breath heaving and billowing small clouds into the cold air. She looked at Harry, and any color she had left drained completely. "Heavens," she whispered. Quickly, she grabbed her wand. "Corpus arestum!" Blue light sprang forth, stopping the diminishing stream of blood that had been squirting in pulses from Harry's chest. "Mr. Goyle, grab his hand!"

There was a crackling, tearing sound like raw meat being torn from bone.

"Odd," Harry thought as his stomach sank and he began to rise from the scene. He found himself hovering some fifteen feet above his body, and suddenly felt warm and comfortable. On the ground, wizards and witches had encircled his corpse. From the north side of the pitch, he could see Professor Dumbledore pushing his way through the crowd. "Am I dead?" he whispered to himself, holding his hands in front of his face. They weren't white, but they were translucent, a shimmering pale blue. He looked at his chest, and where the broom had pierced through bone and flesh, a large black hole remained.

"No. Not dead, young man." Harry spun to see Sir Nicolas drifting towards him from the Gryffindor stands. Nicholas looked down at Harry's body in the snow. "Not yet, anyway."

"Sir Nicolas?" Harry asked, sensing fear for the first time. "What...." He looked down and then back at the approaching ghost. "What's happening?"

"You are between worlds, Harry," Nick replied his face grim and sad. "You have begun to leave the earthly realm. A few moments more and it will be time for your choice. Do choose wisely."

"What?" Harry bellowed. "I... I can't die now! Not like this! What about Voldemort? I have to defeat him!" Harry looked down, and noticed he'd floated further away. On the ground below, Dumbledore had arrived at Harry's body. Madame Guérir was speaking with very animated gestures as Goyle knelt at Harry's side.

"Perhaps you will return," Nick sighed. "It happens. But, seeing you like this," he held Harry's hand in his own examining it like a piece of fruit in the market, "I think you've left Hogwarts for good." Harry jerked his hand away and reached down trying to force himself back into his own body. He couldn't move.

"Everyone!" Dumbledore commanded. "Stand back!" The old wizard's face was frightened as he pulled out his wand. Save for Madame Guérir and Goyle, the group around Harry's body retreated outward. Dumbledore held out his wand and focused his eyes on Harry, the Harry lying dead on the ground. He was whispering something Harry couldn't hear. What looked like the flicker of green fire slowly emerged, not from the tip of his wand, but rather from the eyes of the Headmaster. No one on the ground seemed to notice as it poured forth like a green fog of fire spreading outward and upward in an ever-expanding sphere.

"Oh my," Sir Nicholas let out in surprise. "I never knew."

"Knew what?" Harry yelled. The green bubble of fire was fading as it moved outward. "What's going on?"

"It's not enough," Sir Nicholas sighed. "He can't reach you."

The green flicker began to fade into nothingness when Dumbledore cried out as if reaching for something just out of his grasp. The bubble surged, and was nearly at Harry's feet when he noticed Goyle on the ground taking the hand of his body and reaching for the small box in Madame Guérir's hand. Almost in concert, Dumbledore collapsed to the ground and there was a collective gasp on the pitch.

"No! Wait! Professor!" Harry screamed. Suddenly, the green bubble of fire grabbed his ankle. "Nicholas! I'm not ready! I need to help him!" he called out reaching for the ghost who seemed to be fading away down a darkened tunnel. The small white figure faded as the circle of light shrunk smaller and smaller. Soon, all was dark.

Again, there was a crackling, tearing sound.

The next instant, fire filled his chest, while ice spread through his veins, and Harry knew he had returned to his body. He wanted to rise, to come to Dumbledore's aid, but he couldn't move. A moment later, he felt something yank at his navel -- the portkey -- shooting pain throughout his body. He gasped for air, but none filled his lungs. When the spinning stopped, his eyes opened for an instant to see Greg Goyle and a wizard in green robes looking down at him. An orange light hit him in the chest, warmth filled his body, and he faded from consciousness.

The chirping of crickets filled the night air. The stars were bright and the sky clear. Harry could hear the sound of water trickling to his side. He walked over and found a small spring bubbling clear water out of the side of a rock. It was the head of a small stream that wound its way down a gently sloping hill. There were large trees behind him, and the only way to walk was along the clearing following the path of the stream. There was something about this babbling brook; it was calling to him. He reached down to touch the water, when suddenly the scene changed.

He was in a dimly lit room, as a sharp pain struck him in the forehead. Breathing hard, Harry took a few moments to get his bearings.

Behind him, the floorboard squeaked, and Harry spun to see a figure in a dark cloak step forward.

“The first of the number have been taken, my Lord.” Though her face was covered, Harry knew the voice well; it was Bellatrix. “Shall we begin?” she asked.

“Begin,” Harry heard his own voice rasp in a high familiar pitch. As if anticipating a delicious chocolate cream pudding for desert, Harry turned, licking his lips, and faced the far wall. There, shackled to peeling pillars, was Neville Longbottom.

“Wake-up,” Bellatrix called from inside her hood as her hand slapped Neville across the face. As Neville blinked his eyes, the Death Eater pulled her wand.

“Crucio!” she cried out. Instantly, Neville screamed in agony.

“Get out!” a voice yelled from deep inside Harry’s mind. “Close your mind!” Slowly, he felt his consciousness pulling away, Neville’s screams echoing in his ears.

“Will you not save him?” another voice hissed in his ear. “Will you not save the others?”

“I won’t play the fool this time, Tom,” Harry’s mind pushed back. “Once bitten, twice shy... It won’t happen again.” The darkness swirled and the voices faded to nothingness. Finally, Harry slept.

When his eyes opened, he was in bed, covered with white linens. Flowers and cards filled the room. ‘Get well, Harry’ signs were everywhere, some flashing different colors. The smell told him instantly where he was. At his side sat Hermione, asleep in a chair, while Ron stood at a table on the far side contemplating a box of chocolate frogs.

“Go on,” Harry breathed. He winced as his lungs let out air. His voice was raspy. “I won’t eat them.” Ron dropped the box and instantly spun.

"Harry!" he squeaked, as a nervous smile broke on his face. "You know, I'm really getting sick of this place. Pretty soon they'll have to admit me. How do you feel?" Hermione heard the noise and groggily opened her eyes.

"Harry?" she whispered. "Harry!" She jumped to her feet and gave him a hug. Harry let out a small whimper. "Oh, dear, sorry" she apologized and a tear fell from her face. "They didn't think.... Can you breathe?" Harry tried to take in a breath of air, but a sharp pain stopped him short of a full breath. The door suddenly flew open.

"I heard yelling." It was Greg Goyle, wearing Gryffindor flying robes still stained with Harry's blood. "Is he... He's not..." and then his eyes met Harry's. "You're alive," he gasped. "They thought maybe today..." his voice trailed off then said, "...but you're alive." Harry held his hands in front of his own face. This time they were solid and flesh colored.

"Looks like it," Harry smirked sarcastically. Slowly, Goyle walked over to Harry's bed, and Hermione bent low to Harry's ear.

"You've been here near death for a week, Harry," she whispered. "Greg's refused to leave your side since he brought you in with Madame Guérir."

"How..." Goyle tried to speak. He was nervous. "How does it feel?" Gingerly, Harry sat up in bed and looked down at his chest. There were no bandages, just a large circular scar, four, or five ribs up on his right side. He touched it, and felt no pain.

"Okay," he said looking at the others. "Really. It's fine." Then he focused on Goyle and said lightly, "No thanks to your flying"

Goyle walked to his bedside and knelt. Even on his knees he was tall. He held Harry's arm. "Merlin, Harry. I never meant.... I would never.... I had just hit the Bludger heading for Dennis and there you were!" He began to tremble. "We could have lost everything, Harry, everything." The tone in Goyle's voice struck a chord in Harry's heart.

"It's only a game," said Harry smiling back and patting Goyle's shoulder, but knowing full well Greg had meant much more. "Did we win?"

"We re-started an hour after they took you and Dumbledore from the field," Ron said.

"Dumbledore? Is he okay?"

"Tired is all, Harry," said Hermione. "It's the best way to put it, very tired." She stood up and Goyle took the chair. Walking over to Ron she stroked the redhead's hair. "Ron was really shaken after you'd left; and without Greg, our Chaser's were having a lot of trouble."

"They started scoring on me at will," Ron said gloomily. "They were up fifty points when he caught the Snitch."

"You lost after Bowers took the Snitch?" Harry asked dejectedly.

"No," said Ron grinning. "We won after Sloper grabbed it!"

"Sloper?" Harry asked, hardly able to believe his ears.

"He substituted for you," Hermione joined in. "Ravenclaw was demolishing us when the Snitch appeared below Bowers' broom. Sloper saw it and in a flash, we won!"

Harry leaned back against his pillow. "Brilliant." Goyle began to nod off in the chair.

"Okay, Greg," Hermione said kindly. "You've seen him alive and well. You can go back to school now. We can look out after him for the weekend." At her words, Goyle straightened in the chair.

"Yeah, er, listen, guys," Goyle said wearily to Ron and Hermione, "you've been great. I'd just like a couple minutes alone with Harry. Okay?"

"Sure, mate," Ron said, a hint of concern in his voice. "Take all the time you want. We need to go tell the healer he's awake anyway."

When Ron and Hermione left the room, Goyle wrung his hands together trying to find the right words.

"They didn't want to tell you, not until you're back," he began in a whisper, constantly glancing at the door. "But I think you should know."

"I knew it," Harry snapped. "Dumbledore. What's wrong? Is he..."

"No. Not Dumbledore," Goyle interrupted. He slid the wooden chair closer to Harry's bedside, and stole another look at the door. "It's Neville; he's gone." Harry's heart skipped.

"Gone? I... I don't understand. How do you mean?"

"Ron told me. The night after the match, he never showed up in the common room. Ron had seen him leave the stands with Helen, and thought maybe he was breaking curfew with her and let it slide. But the next morning both Neville and Helen missed breakfast. That's when Ron went to McGonagall. They searched the whole castle and found nothing. Only..." Again he glanced at the door. "Helen was found wandering the greenhouse. Her mind's a mess. It sounds like the Imperius Curse to me," he whispered. With each line in the telling of Goyle's story, Harry's heart sank lower.

"He's taken Neville," he exhaled. His eyes darted this way and that looking at nothing and everything. "But where, damn it? I know I've been there before." Finally, Harry focused all his energy on Goyle. "Greg, you need to get Ron and Hermione in here right now. We can't wait a minute more."

"You can't tell them I told you, Harry."

"You don't understand!" Harry breathed. Then he paused and spoke very deliberately. "Greg, Voldemort's taken Neville."

"You can't know that," Goyle replied somewhat agitated. "Maybe Helen dumped him, he cursed her, and ran for it." Harry was torn. There were only a few who knew the reality of his special connection with Voldemort. He wouldn't share it with Malfoy, but what about

Goyle? He adjusted his pillow trying to sit up higher in bed and grimaced in pain.

“Where are my clothes?”

“No way!” Goyle snapped. “There’s no way you’re ready to leave. I...” Once again, Goyle knelt at Harry’s bedside, one massive hand gently holding Harry’s shoulder down. “I killed you Harry. By rights you should be dead. It was Dumbledore who somehow brought you back, at least most of the way. Even with all his help they never thought you’d live.” The door swung open and a healer in green robes entered followed by Ron and Hermione. He was tall, with a pointed black goatee, and had his wand at the ready.

“Brought me back?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Mr. Potter,” the healer replied with a French accent. “It’s called resuscitation, and there are few better than Albus Dumbledore. Although to catch a soul at such an advanced stage...” he paused almost amazed at listening to his own words, and clucked his tongue. “Well, let’s see, shall we?” The healer held his wand over Harry’s chest and a greenish light emanated down. “We had to do a lot of soul stitching in your case. You are fortunate that I was in Britain.” For a moment Harry had a vision of Gilderoy Lockhart. He hoped this wizard at least knew what he was doing. “How do you feel? Can you breathe?”

“I’m fine, really. Never better.”

“I see,” the healer replied. “Tell me, does this hurt?” He pointed the tip of his wand at Harry’s side, and the light turned from green to blue.

“STOP!” Harry screamed out. Deep within his chest, it felt as if his someone had just poured molten lava. The healer’s light turned red, and the pain vanished with a cool splash.

“Never better, eh?” he asked rhetorically, looking at Harry with sharp eyes. “Your ribs are fine, but we’re still growing lung tissue, and that will take at least one more day. You also lost the top portion of your liver. Growing liver is far more complex, and much less necessary.

The rest of your liver will suffice. Perhaps, this summer, the good healers here will admit you and take care of the deficiency then.” He slid his wand into his jacket. “Until then, you need rest, and no distractions. Now that you’re alert, I believe the vigil can end. Your friends will have to wait for you at Hogwarts.” He looked at the three huddled at the end of Harry’s bed. “You have ten more minutes, and then you really must go.” And with that, the healer left the room.

“Ten minutes!” Ron called at the shutting door, and quickly opened up another chocolate frog. “Just doesn’t seem right if you ask me,” he complained, stuffing the frog in his mouth.

It was clear that Goyle was not going to leave without the other two, and Harry was desperate to tell them without alerting Goyle. He laid his head on his pillow and exhaled, closing his eyes and concentrating hard.

“Ron!” he called with his mind. “Ron! If you can hear me drop the vase.” Nothing happened. “Ron! If you can hear me drop the vase.” Suddenly the vase of flowers crashed to the floor.

“Oh, Ron,” Hermione chided, “I swear....” She pulled out her wand and began to clear the broken glass.

“He’s taken Neville,” Harry called to Ron with his mind. “I’ve seen it in a dream. Voldemort has Neville. We have to find out where. Perhaps a farmhouse.” Harry paused. “Say something!”

“Er... erm... S-Sorry Hermione,” Ron muttered weakly.

“Well you could be a little more...” Hermione began, but looking up saw him pale and shaking. “Ron, you’re white! What’s wrong?”

“We, er... we need to go,” Ron said. He put his arm around Hermione and started toward the door. “Now!” Hermione, a bit confused, looked back to Harry.

“Relax, Harry! Get better,” she called.

"I'll be out soon, don't worry," answered Harry. "Believe me staying here is," he paused and looked at Ron, "torture." Ron winced and shuttled Hermione through the door. Goyle held back and held Harry's eyes with his own.

"You know, I never meant to..." Goyle began.

"I know, Greg," said Harry sincerely. "I don't know why, but I know." Harry was by no means a mind reader, nor was he terribly adept at reading people's intentions. He thought of the imposter Mad-Eye, and how Harry's trust in him had led to Cedric's death. He thought of Kreacher, and Sirius' fall through the black curtain. He believed Goyle, but he wasn't going to place his life on it.

"They think I tried to kill you," Goyle murmured.

"Who?"

"Gryffindor," Goyle said with a grim face. "I was going to ask Dumbledore if I could stay, but after this.... Everyone was waiting for it to happen, and it did."

"You know what, Greg," Harry said brightly. "I know a couple of things, and one of them is how Gryffindors think. They have a soft spot when it comes to loyalty, and when I get back I'll set them straight. Don't you worry." Goyle smiled, bent low, and shook Harry's hand.

"You're all right, Potter."

"You know what else I know?" Harry smiled as Goyle made for the door.

"What?"

"Hangin' around a hospital for a week in bloody racing robes makes you stink. Get back to school and take a shower man. Whew!" Harry started to laugh, but winced as Goyle opened the door. Before the door shut, Goyle turned to the kid he'd killed.

"Be careful, Harry," Goyle said in a solemn voice, but then his face brightened. "I want you back up flying. When I return to Slytherin and we play this spring, I want to be able to knock you off your broom with a nice fat Bludger to the brain."

"You wish," said Harry with a grin. They waved and Goyle let the door click behind him.

As the room fell silent, Harry began to contemplate his options. He tried to take a breath, but the pain was intense. He needed to get back to Hogwarts, but he had no portkey. He wished he could create his own like Dumbledore. No matter, he thought. The first step was to get out of this room. Slowly he straightened himself out onto the floor. The stone was cold beneath his feet as he walked over to the large cabinet against the wall.

"You heard what the healer said," an elderly witch chastised him from a portrait on the wall. "You need your rest."

"What I need is clothes," Harry shot back. He opened the cabinet doors to see his trainers lying on a shirt and a pair of jeans. "Perfect," he whispered. He heard a deep, throaty cough from the hall outside and froze looking back at the door. He slipped off the hospital pants and reached for the jeans, when he heard the cough again, louder this time. The sound was somehow familiar he thought, reaching for the shirt. He wasn't able to bring his right arm up so, with shallow breaths, he stopped to gather the strength for another attempt. The door burst open, and Harry dropped the shirt, spinning to see who it was.

"You still have that thing in your ear I see, Potter." At the door, Mad-Eye Moody stood, his magical eye spinning to either side. "You don't think it had anything to do with your accident I suppose." Harry took a breath to speak, and the pain struck him in the side.

"Professor Moody," he rasped his heart pounding. "They've..."

"First things first, Potter," Moody snapped. "Back in bed." Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Moody held up his hand. "Back in bed. And drop the 'professor' business." Furious, Harry changed back

into his hospital pants and climbed back into bed. By the time his head hit the pillow, however, he was dizzy and his breaths rapid and shallow. He was glad he didn't have to find a way out of St. Mungo's tonight. Moody sat in the wooden chair.

"Okay, Potter. Spill it."

"They've taken Neville Longbottom," Harry breathed. The scars on Moody's face contorted into something resembling a grin.

"And you're going to go save him are you?" Moody queried. The Auror pulled in close to Harry's bed, and with his wand flashed a yellow light at the single portrait hanging on Harry's wall. The witch screeched and ran off. "The wall's have ears boy, don't forget that. He'll be trying to listen to anything you say."

"I saw, sir... the imperious curse... Voldemort..." Harry was trying to say it all, but his trip out of bed had made the pain worse, much worse. Moody held his arm.

"Slow down, boy. Slow down." His eye began to spin and then came back to Harry. "We know they've taken him, Potter. We don't know where. The Ministry and half the Order are out searching for the lad."

"And the other half?" Harry couldn't help ask. Mad-Eye simply patted the boy's arm.

"We need to get you back to Hogwarts and that means you need to heal." Mad-Eye started to stand.

"Wait," Harry rasped again. "I know where." Moody's eyes narrowed. "It's an old house... near farmland. Inside, the paint is peeling." His eyes focused into space. "Rural, with a great field in front." He looked back at Moody. "It feels familiar."

Moody patted Harry's arm again and smiled. He'd come to learn that Harry Potter's words were never to be dismissed lightly. Still, narrowing it down to an old farmhouse was not much help.

“Good work, Harry,” he said. “That helps a lot. I’ll pass the information on.” Moody turned to go. “And you need to get better. We’ll take it from here,” he said closing the door behind him. Knowing that the Order of the Phoenix had his information, Harry’s angst began to subside. His breathing slowed and his chest relaxed. Finally he was able to clear his mind, and soon he was asleep.

He woke to the morning sun streaming through the window, and a hooting at his bedside. Harry reached for his glasses only to find Hedwig with a morning post.

“Hedwig?” he asked, confused. The sound of his voice was stronger. He took a small breath and then a larger one. There was no pain. Harry sat up and stroked the owl’s white feathers. “You’re amazing girl.” Smiling, he took the white envelope in his hands. For the first time in ages he felt rested, and there was something warming about the golden sun shimmering on the walls of his room. And now, even at St. Mungo’s, with a letter from Gabriella, everything seemed right with the world. He slipped his finger under the flap, tore it open, and pulled out a pink sheet of paper wondering what Gabriella would think if he bought her real parchment for Christmas.

Harry,

I’ve begun counting the hours until you come home. I miss you dearly. For the last few days, I’ve spent each night looking at the photo Emma took of us at your birthday party. It seems so long ago -- I miss your smile. When you come home for vacation, I’m having her take a hundred more. I want you all over my walls. Although, I’m not sure Papa likes the idea. He’s been dropping stronger and stronger hints that I should be seeing other boys. Not that it really matters; Papa’s rarely home. He can’t seem to look at Mama anymore.

She has not improved. Every time we think she’s getting better, she falls back into forgetfulness. We can’t seem to talk about anything important anymore. Her mind wanders off and I can’t bring her back.

Now and then, Duncan stops by to visit. He talks more about Emma than anything else. I must say he’s a bit obsessed, but then he probably says the same thing about me, since I always talk about you.

Still, here in the house I feel so alone. I've met so many people in Little Whinging, Harry, but all are missing something you have. I'd like to say it was your heart, or your bright green eyes, or the way you smile when somebody tickles your side, but it's something more. Before she fell ill, Mama said there was something special about you. I want her back in the present, but I look into her eyes and I see her fading further into the past.

As the walls here seem to close in around me, you're the one bright light that still burns in my heart. I'm sure you're terribly bored at school, and these awful letters don't help much, but I've enclosed Emma's picture of us. I just want you to know, I think of you every day. Stay safe, and write soon.

Love,

Gabriella

P.S. I'm glad to hear your friend is doing much better. I can tell your heart is lighter. With you at his side, I'll bet he'll be walking in no time.

Looking at the photo of himself with Gabriella beside a car tire filled with spiked punch, Harry couldn't help but smile. He put the letter down and scratched Hedwig under her beak. Suddenly, his heart had a sliver of ice in it. "She's been seeing Duncan," he said with a bit of irritation in his voice. "How often is 'now and then', Hedwig?" He dropped the photo on his bedside table and set his feet on the floor. "Go on girl," he said, sending Hedwig on her way back to Hogwarts, and then he went over to put his clothes on. As his thoughts turned to Soseh, the ice began to melt. "They'd take care of her properly if she were here," he thought looking at the walls. "How many Muggles have died because of an injury like mine?" He slipped on his pants and felt the circle on the right side of his chest. "If only we could share," he whispered. There was a knock at his door. "Come in," he called. The door swung open and in limped Cho Chang. In her hand was a small bag. Seeing Harry only half dressed, she half-heartedly looked away.

"Oh... sorry, Harry," she stammered, but with a bit of a grin. "I didn't mean..." Harry grabbed her in his arms.

"You're walking on your own!" he cried out. "No Marietta? Excellent!" It was a hug Cho hadn't expected, and she held her head against Harry's chest and squeezed him tight holding his flesh to hers and clinging to the moment as long as it would last. "They let you out on your own?" he asked.

"And why wouldn't they?" Cho replied defiantly. "St. Mungo's sent word you were to be released today. Since I had to stop in for an exam, Professor Dumbledore suggested that I escort you back."

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Yes, why?" Harry paused for a moment, searching his own thoughts. Perhaps he was worried for nothing.

"No reason," he finally replied. "It's great to see you." He gave her a gentle kiss as her hand met his chest. She let out a light breath and looked down.

"Is this it?" she asked. Her finger traced the six inch scar on his chest just below his right pectoral. Harry nodded.

"Amazing isn't it. A week ago you could have put your fist clean through." The words turned Cho white. "Did anybody see it happen?"

"We all saw too much, Harry," Cho said as her voice quaked. "The sky cleared, and there you were in a bath of blood. I've never seen the professors more frightened. I don't know what I would have done if I had lost you too." Harry kissed her cheek, and smiled.

"Well, I'm here now," he said trying to lighten the mood. Let me get dressed and we can get out of here. He walked over to the dressing cabinet, and with his back toward Cho, he started putting on his clothes. "You know, I don't really blame Goyle for what happened," he began. "You could barely see the end of your own broom, never mind the other flyers." He started to recount the entire story of the game. As he started lacing his trainers and telling her how he almost had the Snitch, Cho's voice interrupted him. It had an odd tone, a tone Harry had never heard in Cho's voice.

“Harry?” she asked. “Who is Gabriella?”

Hearing the words, Harry missed the knot on his last trainer, turned, and looked up. Cho was sitting on Harry’s bed. In one hand was a white envelope; in the other was a pink sheet of paper. Her hands were steady and her face stern. Her brown eyes waited for the answer, as Harry looked up at her over his shoulder.

“G-Gabriella?”

Chapter 35 - The Truth Revealed

A thick cloud passed over the morning sun and the golden light that had turned Harry's room so warm and bright began to fade. Backlit by the window, Cho's face darkened, and so too did Harry's heart. For weeks he'd attempted to tell Cho about Gabriella and had been, he felt, thwarted. Now, faced with the prospect of uninterrupted truth telling, Harry's courage faltered. Where to begin? In her bedroom on Privet Drive, Gabriella held his heart in a finely crafted wooden box. She was the one person Harry would leave the Wizarding world for and the one reason why he would never do that--not until Voldemort was vanquished forever. With the turn of a phrase, she could brighten his soul or freeze his heart. He would see her this Christmas and he would love her. Cho, standing over Harry, asked again.

"Well, Harry, who's Gabriella?"

"Nobody," Harry's voice choked. He turned to tie his trainer, but was fumbling miserably.

"Nobody?" she asked in disbelief. "You're the one bright thing that burns in her heart. That doesn't sound like nobody to me." Cho limped over and stood in front of Harry who was concentrating hard on his laces. She was wearing black leather boots that zipped on the sides.

"Those are nice boots," he began. "Where'd you..."

"I asked you a question, Harry Potter!" she snapped. Her calm demeanor had faded and her hands, still holding the pieces of paper, began to tremble. "Who is she?"

Harry gave up on the knot and sat up. He could see fear, or sadness, or anger in Cho's eyes. Perhaps he saw all that, and more. She was in pain and instinctively he stood to hold her. He reached his hand to hers, but Cho pulled away, shaking the papers in his face. Slowly, he took them from her and set them on the table by his bed. He sighed and rubbed his face.

"I tried to tell you," he said with a soft, gentle voice. "I swear... I tried." Cho looked at him, her eyes disbelieving, but her mind searching her memory. After a moment, it came to her.

"This is the one?" she whispered to the air.

"I met her over the summer in Little Whinging. We started spending time together, and became... close." The word didn't feel quite right. "More than close," he added.

"A girl... from home," Cho whispered again as if trying to divine a calculation in Arithmancy. A look of curiosity entered her eyes and she asked, "A Muggle?" Harry nodded in reply and then the thinnest hint of a smile creased her face. "Boy, was I wrong," she said to herself shaking her head. "I thought you and...." She stopped herself, and then limped over to the table and held the note to read it again. She took in a deep breath. "Well, it doesn't matter what I think, does it Harry? It's clear she loves you." For some time she scanned the letter, and finally set down the note and looked at Harry with kind eyes.

"Do you love her?" she asked with a placid voice.

"Yes," Harry replied without hesitation. Cho walked over and held her hand to his face. She hesitated, and then took the silver earring in her hand.

"This is from her, isn't it?" she whispered. Harry reached up and took her hand in his. He felt as if he was stabbing Cho in the heart with each reply and still she wore a gentle smile. Holding her hand, he nodded.

"Why couldn't you tell me, Harry? Why doesn't anybody know?" And then a thought seemed to enter Cho's mind and her manner changed ever so slightly. "Maybe... maybe something in your heart is telling you that there's no future with a Muggle. Does she know about you... about our world?"

Harry shook his head, but didn't answer. In an instant, his mind had wandered to Gabriella, to his friends, to Neville and back to his dream, and with each step there was a growing sense that something more

was at play. He slipped on his glasses and looked around the room for anything else he needed to take back to Hogwarts. The room grew darker as the clouds outside thickened. There was a clap of thunder from somewhere off in the distance as a light rain began to patter against the window.

"Neville's been taken," he said quietly to himself. Cho moved closer to hear his words. "Yes, Neville's been taken," he repeated to himself again, as if by saying the phrase out loud he might understand its meaning. "Voldemort has taken Neville and wants me to try and save him. It's another trap." Taking hold of Harry's hand, Cho gently stroked his arm and shook her head.

"We all know he's missing, Harry. But... You-Know-Who? That's a bit of a stretch."

"He's the first of others," Harry answered, still speaking to himself, his voice growing more solid with each word, and his green eyes stern and steady. The confidence and the surety with which he spoke began to frighten Cho.

"But... but how?" she asked with a slight shudder. But, again, Harry made no reply. He was trying to bring the thought that burned inside to the fore. And then, Cho's earlier words echoed in his mind, and its images stepped back from Neville to Cho. Why hadn't he told her about Gabriella? His thoughts were swirling and he was having trouble holding on to any of them.

"If he knew..." Harry spoke, picking up the last of his things in the room. "If Voldemort knew that Harry Potter was in love with a Muggle from home..."

"He'd kill her," Cho answered. "Or... or worse." Cho tried to take in Harry's reason for secrecy. She knew she'd stopped his attempts to say anything, but then that was because she thought....

"Oh, Harry," she sighed and pulled him close. "I've put you in an awful spot."

“Don’t be silly,” Harry caught himself saying. “It’s my fault for not just coming out with it. Only, Ron knows the details.” And then looking into her eyes he said, “You can’t tell anybody; I mean it. Nobody can know.”

“Don’t worry Harry,” Cho answered. “I swear I’d never...” But then, suddenly, Harry’s eyes widened.

“Neville!” he yelled. “Oh no... Neville!” Harry reached down, grabbed Gabriella’s letter and shoved it in his pocket. “My wand! Where’s my wand?” Cho carefully walked over to where Harry had slept. On the wall, at the head of the bed, was a small drawer.

“They’re usually...” the drawer slid open and she slipped out Harry’s wand. “There,” she said holding out his wand. “Most folks like them close. Merlin, you’d think you’d know; you spend so much time over here.” She poked him gently in the ribs.

“Thanks.” Harry breathed deep and felt his chest spasm with pain. His mind was searching its memory of the meal he’d shared with Neville. He’d told him that he was seeing a Muggle in Little Whinging. But, what else? “I’ve got to tell Dumbledore. He’ll know what to do. We have to go.”

Their return trip to Hogwarts was the very same that Harry had taken with Cho’s brother James two months earlier. A lifetime ago, Harry thought. For support, he held Cho’s arm as they ascended the front steps to the castle, but the warmth and intimacy that had been their days earlier was gone. The first drops of rain were just beginning to fall. They were heavy, and each splatter on the stone steps sounded like the report of a pistol being shot into the air. The castle grounds were deserted. Odd, Harry thought, for a Sunday.

“Are they forcing the students to stay inside?” Harry asked.

“Not that I know of,” Cho replied wondering the same thing.

At the front entrance, stood Professor McGonagall. She wore an unusually broad smile, but still had a look of concern on her face. She put her arm around Cho and helped her to the front doors.

“How was your check-up, Ms. Chang?” she asked. Harry realized that he hadn’t asked himself.

“Fine, Professor,” Cho answered. “They’ve confirmed that my brain cells are growing back. The same steady growth since I first regained consciousness is continuing. They don’t know why, but I think I do.” She cast Harry a glance that he did not detect.

“Excellent!” Professor McGonagall answered. Her attention also turned to Harry who was doing his best to be patient, but was starting to lose the battle. When she looked at Harry, he saw something in her expression he’d never seen before. She was looking through him, almost as if part of him was missing. “And you, Harry?” she spoke in a softer voice. “How are you?”

“We need to get inside, Professor,” he answered pushing at the front doors. “I have to speak with...”

As the doors flew open, he was met with a blast of cheers. Hermione was the first to greet him. She wrapped him in her arms and kissed his face. Tears of joy welled up in her eyes as she held him tight.

“I hate Quidditch,” she said as a flood of other students encircled Harry and began to hug him or pat him on the back.

The entrance hall had been decorated for a celebration. Against the wall was a banner that flashed in different coloured lights ‘The boy that lived!’ Harry searched the throng for Professor Dumbledore, but only found his classmates and one very large professor that parted the sea of students as he strode toward Harry.

“I thought... I thought fer sure yeh was dead,” Hagrid said reaching down and holding Harry with his huge hands. He lifted him off the ground and pulled him close. Hagrid’s grip made Harry wince in pain.

“Hagrid, you can’t lose me that easily,” Harry breathed, trying to smile back at the giant. The added height gave him a new perspective and as he looked around, he saw students from all four houses, even

Slytherin, but he still couldn't find the Headmaster. "Where's Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked, and Hagrid's face grew dark.

"It took a lot out of him to bring yeh back, Harry," Hagrid replied, setting Harry back to the floor. "He's been... restin'."

"I need to..."

"Hey mate," Ron called, rubbing Harry's hair with his hand. Standing next to Hagrid and Ron, Harry suddenly felt very short. "If you think this is something, wait 'till you get to the common room. Gryffindor still hasn't celebrated its victory over Ravenclaw. It's been a pretty gloomy week around here, what with you, Neville, and all."

"Listen!" Harry called out, but the room was so filled with people talking that nobody heard. Hagrid lifted Harry up again.

"Pay attention now!" Hagrid yelled, and the room fell silent. Harry cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Thank you all so much for everything. It was your spirit that brought me back." There was a cheer. "Please stay and enjoy the food, but I need to go properly thank someone who's not here right now, the man that saved my life." Hagrid put Harry down and he started for Professor Dumbledore's office. Before he was out of the entrance hall, however, Professor McGonagall stopped him.

"Mr. Potter," she said, "I know you wish to see the Headmaster, but he really must not have any guests right now."

"I have to, Professor," Harry shot back. "I know about Neville. I know..."

"Yes, yes," Professor McGonagall interrupted. "Alastor has already given us that information. Rest assured that we are all putting it to good use." Harry shook his head madly.

"You don't understand Professor. There's more. If I could only..."

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter!" The voice of Professor Dumbledore reverberated down the corridor. It was clear, if not strong, and turned the heads of many of the students. Another cheer rang out. Professor Dumbledore walked to Harry and was himself surrounded with students. The elderly wizard breathed in deeply as if filling himself with the energy around him. He stood tall, looking every bit the part of the greatest wizard walking the face of the earth. But, Harry noted that something was not right. Nonetheless, when he spoke, he addressed the crowd in a powerful voice. "I am so proud that all the houses turned out today to show their support for a fellow student. It is a testimony to the spirit of Hogwarts. Please excuse the two of us for a moment. I promise to return Mr. Potter to you shortly." His words put fire into Professor McGonagall's eyes.

"Headmaster!" she scolded. "You really shouldn't..."

"There are many things I shouldn't do Minerva," he cut in. "Eating cream cakes after midnight, for example. This, however, is not one of them." He took Harry by the shoulder and the two walked down the corridor to his office. When they had finally cleared the crowd and noise, Harry began to speak.

"Professor, I need to..."

"Not yet, Harry. Not here."

They ascended the spiral staircase to Professor Dumbledore's office. When the door shut the two of them in, Professor Dumbledore exhaled and slumped against his desk. In the blink of an eye, his strong demeanor turned weak. He was an aged old man and looked as if he would faint to the floor. The portraits of old headmasters yelled for him to get back to bed, but he held up his hand for them to be still, and fell into his chair.

"Silence," he whispered weakly. Harry was at his side in an instant.

"Professor? What's wrong?" The old wizard looked at Harry and smiled gently. He reached out and placed his hand against Harry's face.

“Nothing is wrong, Harry. Indeed, the very fact that you are standing in my office now is proof that everything is right.” His voice trailed off as he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “There was a moment when I thought the prophecy had failed. Your destiny is strong, yet one dare not tempt fate.”

“You need to rest, sir,” Harry urged holding Professor Dumbledore’s arm. The wizard faced Harry flashing bright blue eyes that were ageless.

“It was you who asked for me, Harry. What is it you have to say?” Seeing Dumbledore so weak and frail, Harry had let his thoughts of Neville and Gabriella slip away. But, with the wizard’s question, they rushed back in a torrent.

“He has Neville,” Harry began. “At a farmhouse, or an old house in a field.” Dumbledore looked closely at Harry’s green eyes, and saw concern and compassion.

“Alastor, told us,” Professor Dumbledore replied. “He’s in your dreams again?” A pang of guilt poked at Harry’s innards, and he looked away.

“It’s... different this time,” Harry answered slowly. “I’m having visions I don’t understand... but they’re not from him,” he insisted. “And other times, when I forget to clear my mind... he calls. I can tell when it’s Voldemort... when I’m Voldemort. We... we can talk.” At these words, Dumbledore sat higher in his chair.

“Harry, this is very important. What does he say?” Dumbledore leaned in waiting for the answer.

“He’s taken Neville. He’s torturing Neville.” Harry’s face was pained as he looked at Professor Dumbledore. “He wants me to save him. He’s challenging me to step forward or... or he’ll take others.”

“He’s challenging you to save your friend, and yet you do not know where to go?”

"Until today, I thought it was a trap, a lie like... like Sirius." Harry walked over and sat in front of Dumbledore's desk. "There's more, sir. Only Ron and one other know about Gabriella." Harry paused feeling that, somehow, it was his fault that Neville had been taken. "Neville knows I was dating a Muggle in Little Whinging." The conversation Harry had with Neville began to play in his head. "He knows she's tall, and has black hair." With each revelation the panic in Harry's voice increased. "He knows she's my neighbor." Harry stood. "If he knows to ask, it won't take Voldemort long to know it's the girl across the street." Dumbledore was rolling the information over in his mind slowly -- too slowly for Harry's sake.

"Harry, it was only a matter of time," Dumbledore said taking a deep breath and standing, his legs unsteady. "I have placed significant charms to protect Gabriella." Dumbledore walked over to his spinning disk and touched it with his wand. He examined the rising points of light that Harry thought represented members of the Order, each spread out across a map of the globe -- stars that only Dumbledore could identify. "She still knows nothing of your wizardry?" Harry shook his head, no. At this, Dumbledore asked, "Nor her family?" The tone in the question didn't seem right to Harry. It was as if Dumbledore expected a different answer.

"She's seen things," Harry answered. "But Muggles see magic everyday and don't really see it. I mean... well... she's smart, sir." Harry smiled thinking about how he had to kick her out of his room. "She knows I'm different."

"And her family?" Dumbledore asked again.

"Her mother's not well. And her father... her father hates me. He doesn't know me at all. He thinks I'm a Muggle juvenile delinquent."

In silence, Professor Dumbledore intently watched one particular point of light for quite some time. It was red, and seemed to disappear and reappear at different locations in the field of white stars. "She has returned to the Isle?" he whispered to himself. Shaking his head, he feebly waved his wand and the lights fell back into the spinning disk. Leaning against the table, he looked at Harry.

"Harry, there are sufficient safeguards in place to protect Gabriella," he said finally. "I need to know, however, have you made your choice?" For a moment, Harry looked up confused, but then the Headmaster's meaning became clear.

"Cho knows," he said softly. "She learned of Gabriella this morning at the hospital."

"That was not my question, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said firmly. The sixteen year-old walked over to Fawkes and began to stroke the bird's neck. The phoenix was full-grown now, and his plumage brilliant.

"The choice was made months ago, sir. It's Gabriella. It's always been Gabriella." At Harry's words, Professor Dumbledore nodded, and slowly crumpled back into his chair. His blue eyes began to twinkle and a smile spread across his face.

"Then it is time to tell her the truth, Harry." Harry looked at him in surprise. Dumbledore nodded to his questioning face. "Perhaps... over Christmas."

"I can go home?" Harry asked, remembering Dumbledore's concern that it was no longer safe.

"If it is safe enough for Gabriella, it certainly will be safe enough for you." Harry noticed that the white in his beard seemed somehow duller, and yet his eyes were as bright as ever. "Now, however, you have guests that await. What you've said has been helpful, Harry. I am unsure of your visions. They are not unusual in someone your age. As for speaking with Voldemort, it would be best to close your mind completely to his thoughts; you know this." Dumbledore stood slowly, and Harry knew it was time to go. "If Tom wants to send you messages, let him use the post." He walked Harry to the door, but it was clear it took some effort. Suddenly, Harry stopped short of the door and put his arms around Dumbledore.

"Thank you," Harry whispered holding the wizard tightly in his arms. "Thank you. I saw you bring me back to life. I was watching from above." He looked into the headmaster's eyes. "But if I knew that it

would cause you this much suffering, and I had it in my power, I would never...”

“Suffering?” Dumbledore exclaimed with a hoarse laugh. “Pain?” He shook his head and held Harry tightly by the shoulders looking intently into his eyes. “The gift, as my family calls it, has been in our line for generations. It is a sharing of spirit... of energy. It is not taught and is only given willingly. What I shared with you, I may retrieve again.” Professor Dumbledore smiled kindly. “At my age, everything takes longer than it used to, and there are never guarantees. Now be on your way.”

Harry was uncertain as he looked at Professor Dumbledore. Still, he nodded his head and left the headmaster to rest. By the time he’d made it back to the entrance hall, most everyone had left. The sky had cleared and many were taking the opportunity to get outside to enjoy the relatively warm autumn day. Ron and Hermione were clearing away the tables, and Goyle was standing in the corner talking to Toby Vilis, one of the Slytherins that had been so proud of Malfoy for knowing who blew up the Hogwart’s Express. Hermione saw Harry as he entered and quickly strode over to him.

“How is he?” she asked. And then, without waiting for an answer, “We haven’t seen him all week. They were saying he had died.” She was clearly not herself. A sense of worry was on her face that had begun to set like drying plaster. The uncertainty in Harry’s eyes was not reassuring.

“He’s...” Harry began, and his eyes wandered around the room, unable to hold Hermione’s gaze. They fixed on a large suit of armor against the far wall where Ron was removing the last table. He could feel tears welling in his eyes, and he breathed hard to keep them in.

“Harry?” she asked again, now with a quaver in her own voice.

“If I hurt him,” he whispered to the far wall at the banner still flashing coloured lights, “it won’t be ‘The boy that lived.’ It will be ‘The boy that killed Dumbledore.’” He turned to look at her again, and found a tear streaking down her cheek. With his hand, he gently took hers. “He says he’ll get better, Hermione. We’ve got to believe that... don’t

we?" Ron waived his wand at the banner and it disappeared. Then, he made his way over to Hermione and Harry.

"Why the gloomy faces?" he said cheerfully. "There's a Gryffindor party waiting upstairs, Harry. A real party, if you know what I mean, mate." Ron slapped Harry on the shoulder, but as he got closer he sensed something he'd missed. Ron looked at Hermione and wiped the tears off her face, and she rushed to put her arms around him. Ron held her in his and said softly, "He's getting better Hermione, you'll see. He'll be blasting Death Eaters in no time." Ron tenderly kissed her cheek in a way Harry had never seen before.

"Come on," Harry said to his two friends. "If Fred and George were here, they'd start playing violin music. Let's try to have a good time tonight. There might not be too many chances left." As they started up the stairs he asked in his best, disinterested voice, "How long did Cho stay for?" Ron slapped him on the shoulder again and Harry, still tender, winced.

"You do know, mate," Ron smiled, "she's in love with you, right?" Harry looked at Ron, and knowing Hermione was still there tried to talk in code. Which, knowing Hermione, he was sure would fail miserably.

"I... I... told her... I told her today, Ron," Harry stammered.

"Told her what?" Ron asked, dully. Harry rolled his eyes and sighed.

"I told Cho about you-know-who," Harry whispered.

"About V-Vold... You-Know-Who?" Ron's eyes scrunched in confusion.

"Or for goodness sake, Ron!" Hermione jumped in. "You're as thick as Hagrid's waist. He's saying that he told Cho today about Gabriella." Harry stopped dumbstruck. Hermione shyly smiled and took his hand. "Ron told me weeks ago, Harry. Well, a little anyway. I've been dying to ask you more, but I promised." She looked at Ron apologetically.

In the hallway to the Gryffindor common room, Harry glared at Ron whose eyes began to grow in fear that Harry might erupt in anger. But inside, there was no anger, no sense of betrayal, only a splashing of emotions against the walls of his brain. He wasn't sure what to say, or what to do. Hermione broke the momentary silence.

"Was Cho angry?" she asked. Harry's mind spun from Little Whinging back to Hogwarts with her words, but he had missed the question.

"What?" he muttered in a small voice.

"When you told Cho, did she get angry?" Hermione asked, pulling on his hand, and beckoning him toward the portrait of the Fat Lady. Harry nodded his head no.

"She knew already, I think," he whispered. "But she's upset. She just won't show it. No more tears this year, she said." Then he turned his attention to Ron who was following a few steps back. "Ron, who else? Who else have you told?" His words were sharp and his eyes intense. Ron stepped close to Harry and held him by the arm.

"Nobody, mate," he said solidly. "I swear, nobody else knows."

"Because if you..." Harry continued and looked at them both, "if either of you have told anybody, her life's at risk."

"Nobody else knows," Ron repeated.

"Nobody," Hermione echoed. Harry took a deep breath and sighed, and then his own shoulders slumped.

"Neville knew," Harry said quietly as he watched a third year Gryffindor pass by and enter the common room through the portrait of the Fat Lady. As the painting swung open, the sounds of laughter and singing poured out and down the hall. Clearly, the party had begun in earnest without them. As it swung shut and silence filled the corridor, Harry continued. "I told him about her, and now he's been taken by Voldemort." Ron's face whitened. "The first of others, he told me."

This time, even Hermione didn't question his assertion. Somehow she knew, they all knew, that Neville was in the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. In silence, the three looked at each other knowing the other's thoughts. They would do everything they could to get Neville back. There was a grim look of determination on all their faces as they pondered their next move. The portrait swung open again, and Ginny peeked through the opening.

"They said you guys were out here!" she called smiling. "Come on Harry... you too Ron. Colin wants to get a photograph of the team!" Harry hoisted a smile onto his face.

"On our way Ginny!" he called down the hall. As he started for the open portrait, Hermione touched his arm and he turned.

"You're not alone in this Harry," she said softly. "You never have been." A burst of laughter rang down the corridor. Harry looked at his two best friends and smiled.

"I know Hermione, I know. Now, let's let Neville know the same thing."

Chapter 36 - Out of Wisdom, Blood

The air was cold as Harry looked up at the afternoon sky, and the grass, damp against his back, scratched at the nape of his neck. There were no clouds, only a light haze that turned the sky a milky blue. A week had passed since his return to Hogwarts and still they were no closer to learning the whereabouts of Neville Longbottom. Ron and Hermione listened to Harry repeat his dreams to them all week. Each felt the descriptions familiar, but neither could come up with a location. Harry had suggested trying to reach out to Voldemort's mind again, but Hermione's protestations and Harry's promise to Dumbledore kept him from the attempt. As for Dumbledore, no one had seen nor heard from the great wizard and rumors were swirling that he was near death. Despite Harry's adamant denials that the Headmaster was well, he was losing the battle against the gossip, and students, brought to Hogwarts to be protected from the Dark Lord, were talking of how their parents were thinking to remove them.

The only bright spot was that Harry had cleared the air about Gabriella with Hermione and Ron. He had told them about his summer with her, of the accident, and about how he stunned the police officer. And, while Ron gaped and Hermione furrowed her brow, it was as if a great burden had been lifted from his soul. Hermione had been right, sharing his worries made them seem more tolerable, and his fears more faceable.

The one secret he felt they would not understand was his secret alliance with Malfoy. The blonde had yet to demonstrate anything more than arrogance and a smug attitude. In class and in the corridors, Malfoy and Harry were at each other's throats, but during the few private moments they had together, they would share their visions of a world without a Dark Lord. Unfortunately, those visions, as far as Harry was concerned, were quite different. Malfoy continued to ask Harry to be patient, that he was working on a demonstration that would permit Harry to place his faith fully into Malfoy's commitment. "You'll know when the time comes, Potter," Malfoy whispered the last time Harry asked.

Harry was growing skeptical and impatient, so Malfoy offered a small token towards their new alliance only two days before the second Hogsmeade trip. He promised to make himself scarce, allowing Harry to again enter Hogsmeade as the Slytherin. Believing Harry had concocted a Polyjuice Potion, and still disinclined to enter Hogsmeade on his own, Malfoy was perfectly happy to let Harry convince the rest of the school that the Slytherin's bravery was steadfast. For his part, Harry was determined to set things straight with Cho and the Ravenclaws. Borrowing a set of Malfoy's clothes, he went to the broom shop in Hogsmeade and bought another Caduceus, and in the Three Broomsticks he presented it to Cho as atonement for his actions. "A token from the Malfoy estate, that you might find a way to fly again," he said in his best Malfoyian voice. To his disappointment, the Slytherins, and most of the Ravenclaws assumed the broom was cursed, but back at school Harry convinced Cho that Malfoy was being sincere, if not a show off. Her trust in Harry's words was why he found himself now flat on his back in the middle of the pitch, damp from the melted snow, his eyes scanning the sky above. A streak of blue flashed by the rings on the south end of the pitch and an instant later Cho, in her Quidditch robes, was hovering above him some six feet off the ground.

"This is amazing," she said smiling down at Harry. "It's as if it's flying me!" And, in a swirl of color, she was off again. The broom's sticking charms and self-adjustment abilities, along with Cho's continued recovery, worked in unison allowing her to fly across the sky with relative ease. Harry stood up and walked over to a large leather chest in the middle of the pitch, opened the lid, and pulled out the Quaffle. Holding it in his hands for a few moments he tossed it high into the air. Cho appeared from nowhere, reached to grab it under her arm, but fumbled and it slowly fell toward the ground. She turned and made another reach, this time tucking it under her left arm and racing for the rings at the south end of the pitch. She tossed the Quaffle through the right ring and Harry let out a lone cheer.

"Score!" he yelled, and then he hopped on his own broom and raced to meet her. She had been in the air for over two hours, improving with every minute, and the smile on her face was broad. Still, Harry could see she was tired.

"I think that's enough for today, don't you?" he offered gently. "It's almost time for dinner." Cho shot down and scooped up the Quaffle just before it hit the ground and returned to him at the center ring.

"Catch!" She laughed hurling the Quaffle at Harry, who grabbed it fully in the stomach winding him for an instant. "What's the matter? You're not getting tired are you?" she teased, but an instant later the features of her face hardened. "You've been laying on the grass for most of the afternoon. Frankly, I'm not sure why you're even out here." She turned her broom to make another run to the rings on the north end. "Why don't you go to dinner? Believe me, I'm fine without you." Her words had an unnecessary bite to them.

It had been Harry's hesitant suggestion after breakfast that they come out and fly together, and after Cho had finally mastered the basics, he had chosen to relax and simply watch. She was correct on one count. He was tired, very tired. He had still not caught up with his studies after having missed a week of school, and most his spare time had been spent trying to come up with a way to find out where Neville was. Helen was certainly no help, and the few leads he and his friends had went nowhere. Harry sighed and nodded his head dejectedly. He dipped his broom low and started for the castle, but Cho was at his side before he hit the ground.

"Harry, wait!" she called, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. You're right... I am tired, and I get grumpy when I'm hungry." The two landed on the ground, Cho taking a moment to find her balance. When Harry reached to help, she slapped his hand away, but in so doing twisted backwards and fell to the turf. She rolled over and sat dropping her face in her hands, and she began to cry. "Just... go... please... leave me alone!"

Harry stood with his Caduceus in one hand trying to decide if he should try to help, or obey her wishes. He took a step toward her.

"Go away!" she yelled staring up at him with red eyes and a wet face. Harry dropped his head and started up for the castle. Just before he entered he looked back to see Cho still sitting on the ground, still crying, alone. For a moment he hesitated, and then he turned and passed through the castle doors.

When he entered the Gryffindor common room to change for dinner, he found it crowded with activity. Ginny and Dean were again seated together on the couch by the fire, Dean helping her write a scroll on various sleeping draughts. Ron and Hermione were at the large table at the back of the common room and, for a moment, Harry thought to sit with them and ask if they'd come up with any new ideas. But he knew they'd ask him about Cho, and just thinking about that was exhausting. Instead, he started up the stairs and soon found himself prone on his bed, staring at the round ball of cinnabar in his hands.

As he rolled the red rock around in his fingers, his mind again turned to Little Whinging and Gabriella. Christmas was a month away and he suddenly realized that he needed to get her a present and perhaps something for her parents. He might even buy a gift for the Dursleys he thought smiling to himself, perhaps a book on yard maintenance, or home décor. Looking at Dudley's gift in his hands, he told himself that he would buy something special for his cousin, something with meaning. The room was quiet as he sat up and looked at Neville's empty bed.

"I'll bring you back, Neville," he whispered. "Just hang on. I swear... I'll bring you back." He stood and placed the ball back in the mouth of the black dragon, reading once again the inscription on the mahogany base. Out of bravery, fire. Out of wisdom, blood. Out of love, true power. "Gabriella, I hate puzzles," he said rubbing his temples and then running his fingers through his hair. He changed his clothes and started for the stairs when he stopped.

"I wonder," he breathed. He turned to his desk and sat at his chair, placing the dragonhead squarely in front of him. Slowly, he extended his finger and pricked the tip on one of the dragon's teeth. A small red drop appeared and he lifted his hand and watched as the droplet grew and then dripped from the tip of his finger on to the cinnabar stone in the dragon's mouth. He looked and waited for something, anything, to happen. He let another and another droplet fall to the stone and still there was no change.

"Hey, mate," Ron called from behind. "We're headin' for dinner, do you want to come?"

“Er, yeah,” Harry said nervously, quickly wrapping his finger with his other hand. “I’ll meet you down in the Great Hall.”

“Everything okay?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, I just got a parchment cut is all. I’ll heal it and be down in a second.”

“I hate those. They never do seem to heal right away.” Ron started on down the stairs. “We’ll save you a spot,” he called back.

“Stupid,” Harry hissed. “Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!” He took his wand out and bathed his finger in blue light. “What were you thinking, Potter?” he muttered to himself. “It’s some sort of Muggle puzzle, so start looking for a Muggle solution.” The blue light faded, but the prick on his finger remained. “What?” he whispered. Again, he waved his wand and this time spoke the incantation forcefully, but the small slit on his finger would not vanish. “Great,” he spat, “I get to go to Madame Pomfrey with a paper cut.” He grabbed a sock and dabbed the blood and, before his eyes, the wound sealed. His brow furled in confusion and he shook his head taking the sock over to wipe off the red ball of cinnabar. But, when he lifted it in his hand, he found it clean and polished. He rolled it in his fingers, but nowhere could he see dried blood on its surface. Had he cleaned it already? Again he shook his head and slowly placed the ball back in the dragon’s mouth. For a moment he stood there, staring at the gifts on his desk and at his finger, trying to put the pieces together. His stomach growled and the thought of dinner filled his mind. He sighed, tossed the sock on his bed, and started for the Great Hall.

As Harry passed the front doors to the castle, he saw Draco Malfoy and Vincent Crabbe hiding in the corner. He stopped and watched as Phillip Pacer, a Beater on the Hufflepuff team, passed by. Malfoy held out his wand and cast a spell hitting Pacer in the back. He stopped momentarily, rubbed his neck, shook his head, and continued on his way. Crabbe snickered as the two stepped out of hiding and started for the Great Hall. Malfoy looked up and saw Harry staring down on them. He whispered something to Crabbe who was busy watching Pacer. Instead of joining Crabbe to the Great Hall, Malfoy went to the

front doors. When Crabbe disappeared, Malfoy looked up at Harry and beckoned him to follow outside.

The sky was growing dark as a full moon lifted its head above the horizon in the east. Two minutes behind the Slytherin, Harry made his way down the steps from the castle entrance and watched the stars spring out across the evening sky, the cold air biting at his face. Stopping to admire the sight, Harry sighed and his breath billowed up before him. He saw a figure with blonde hair walking toward the lake and then disappearing behind one of the leafless trees. When he caught up to Malfoy, he found him sitting at the base of the tree, looking out across the lake, and smoking what appeared to be a sort of cigarette.

"Hello, Harry," he drawled taking a puff and blowing a large plume of acrid smoke. "I hear things didn't go so well today with your girlfriend. Did you think if she could fly again, she'd fall in love with you?"

"You know nothing of love, Draco."

"No... no, I suppose I don't," he replied flatly, crushing the burning ashes into the frozen ground and rising to his feet. By the light of the moon, his skin seemed even more pale and the scar on his face more stark. For a moment, Harry felt a pang of regret, then quickly shoved the feeling to a dimly lit recess of his brain. Malfoy stepped close to him, his steel eyes, unblinking, met Harry's gaze. "But then, there's a lot about me, Potter, that you don't know," he breathed, his voice like ice. "Time will tell."

There was a small splash out on the lake as the two stood eye-to-eye, neither saying a word, nor moving. And then, unmistakably, Harry noticed Malfoy's scar begin to fade ever so slightly. It was clear even by moonlight that the sword and snake on Malfoy's face had diminished, but Malfoy seemed unaware of the change. Instead, he let out a deep sigh as if removing a tremendous weight from within.

"It's time for your demonstration, Harry," he whispered still transfixed on Harry's green eyes. "The moment you, we, have both been waiting for." Malfoy turned and began to walk slowly toward the lake. Wary to follow, Harry began to look around, wondering if this was a trap.

Malfoy stopped and laughed at Harry's hesitation. "I think this warrants your bravery, Gryffindor." Irritated, Harry stepped forward and followed Malfoy to the lake's shore.

"What is it, Draco?" Harry snapped in a hushed voice. "I've got better things to do than..."

"You have NOTHING better to do!" Malfoy shot back. "It was you that wanted this to go slowly, Potter. But, we don't have time for slow. He's coming to Hogwarts and you don't seem to see that, do you? The bombings and attacks around the world, all mean nothing to him. That's being done by someone else's hand, but you don't see that either. Do you, Harry? There's more evil in this world than just Voldemort."

"I can think of one family in particular," sniped Harry.

"Power isn't evil, Potter, nor is knowledge. It's what you do with them, isn't it? Their ultimate master and his apprentice have gone insane. Their eyes are bent on one place, one person... Harry Potter, and they'll kill us all just to get to you and I don't intend to wait for them to try!"

"Very eloquent, Draco," Harry replied smoothly, "but your words are sheer speculation, a mere theory, and hardly a demonstration of your commitment to our common cause. I need..."

"My father and Augustus Rockwood are hiding in Belvaird Castle just east of Glenfarg. They just arrived last night and they won't stay more than a day or two." Malfoy reached down and picked up a rock, reminding Harry for a moment of Ron. But, instead of throwing it out across the lake, he rolled it over in his hand, rubbing its muddy surface in his fingers, and then tossed it to Harry who caught it in his hands. He stepped over to Harry and with the same muddy hand reached up to examine Harry's earring with his fingers, but Harry grabbed his wrist.

"What's going on Malfoy?" he sneered.

“What’s the matter, Harry? Don’t you like to get a bit dirty?” Malfoy smiled. “This bit of silver hasn’t left your ear all year,” Malfoy said, withdrawing his hand. “For a little prat that can afford anything, it’s clear that this token means something. I’ll know we’re even, when you tell me the truth about the earring. I want to know what’s in here.” Malfoy placed his muddy hand on Harry’s chest, turned and briskly strode toward the castle. At the base of the steps he turned and yelled, “Only one day, Potter! Make it count!”

Harry stood in disbelief. Malfoy had just betrayed his father, or knew of an elaborate trap for those that would come to take him away. The question was, “What to do with the information?” The night was growing colder as the moon rose in the sky. Harry made his way to the castle doors and heard, or felt, a deep rumble that seemed to emanate from the very ground itself. He was about to lose his footing when the rumble suddenly stopped, the air still and silent save for the gentle sound of waves splashing on the shore of the lake. He looked around; only a billowing smoke from Hagrid’s hut made any movement in the night air. Finally, he made his way to dinner.

When he arrived in the Great Hall, he found Hermione and Ron just finishing with dinner. At the head table, Professor McGonagall had ended her meal, but was speaking with Professor Flitwick in what appeared to be a very deep conversation.

“Hey, Harry,” Ron called, “I don’t know what your definition of a minute is, but mine ended about an hour ago.”

“Yeah, er,” Harry glanced back to the head table, “sorry. I ran into...” Professor McGonagall rose from her table. “...homework’s crazy and I needed to...” She made her way to the exit. “...Quidditch, and... er, excuse me, be back in a minute.” He turned to catch up with Professor McGonagall as she left the Great Hall. Ron simply shook his head, pondering if he should have another desert while he waited.

“Professor!” Harry called to the Gryffindor Head-of-House. “Professor, wait!” She turned to see Harry running after her.

“Yes, Mr. Potter,” she replied. “What is it?”

"I need to speak with you," he cast a glance left and then right, "alone."

"Really, Mr. Potter, I don't have time for..."

"I have a message for the Order," he interrupted in a whisper. Professor McGonagall cast a look around and with a hint of resistance beckoned Harry to follow her to her office. Once there, she waved her wand and all the portraits vacated.

"Very well, Mr. Potter," she said sitting behind her desk and straightening a small stack of papers. "What is it?"

"I know where Lucius Malfoy is," Harry answered. Professor McGonagall's eyebrow raised above her right eye as she looked at Harry over the top of her reading glasses. "He's with Augustus Rockwood at Belvaird Castle, east of Glenfarg." Her eyes widened.

"The Headmaster told you specifically to shut your mind," Professor McGonagall snapped. "Do you have any idea what sort of tricks he could be playing in your head?"

"I know what I know, Professor. He's there, or it's a trap. Either way, we can't let the opportunity pass; they'll be gone by tomorrow night." She took her glasses off, tossed them on the desk in front of her, and stood from her chair.

"Albus," she whispered to the air. Her face had turned ashen, almost frightened, but in a flash the fear had washed away with resolve. "Very well, Mr. Potter, I'll pass the word on one condition." Harry tilted his head waiting for her words. "You will shut your mind to that beast, no matter what he tries to tempt you with." Harry nodded his head to reassure her.

"I'll do my best, Professor. You have my word."

"Very well, be on your way; there's much to be done. I know someone in Fife that might be able to help check things out. We'll only get one chance though. She moved toward the back door of her office. Harry

had never been behind that door and always wondered... “I said, be on your way, Mr. Potter!”

He went first to the Great Hall in hopes of getting something to eat, but the doors were shut. He thought maybe Ron would have saved him a bite back in the common room, but instead of returning to his room he turned toward the kitchens. The thought of Dobby entered his mind. It had been weeks since he’d last asked and perhaps there was some more news.

The house elf opening the door to the kitchen bowed low when he saw who it was. “An honor, sir, an honor. Might the lowly Tellus get the great Harry Potter something to eat?” Before Harry could say turkey sandwich, he was seated and surrounded by house elves serving him dinner.

“Please, that’s enough, really,” he begged. “I have plenty.”

“Harry Potter’s deeds grow greater with each passing day, sir,” said Caesar, the house elf Harry assumed to be the head cook. He was certainly larger than the others and they all seemed to pay him deference as he walked past. “Anything Caesar can do for the great Harry Potter, shall be done.” There was a general murmur of consent around the kitchen as pots and pans continued to clang away while the house elves cleaned up after the evening’s dinner.

“Have you heard from Dobby?” Harry asked.

“Caesar has heard of Dobby’s quest, sir,” Caesar said quietly while slowly passing his hand about Harry’s head just as Dobby had done. “The mark is here, but from where...” Caesar shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. “It is foreign to all of us.”

Harry finished his food, learning little more about the magic that surrounded him than he knew before. A “dark mark of protection” they all called it. “Ancient magic.” The one thing new, according to Caesar, was that the aura that surrounded Harry seemed to be tightening around him. Caesar had never seen this before, and only shook his head when Harry asked if that was a good thing. As Harry left the kitchens he bowed to Caesar.

"You are a great cook Caesar and a great friend to me. If Dobby returns, you'll send me word?" Harry hoped the compliment might help and it seemed to as Caesar broke out in a great toothy smile.

"You have Caesar's word, Harry Potter, sir," Caesar replied bending so low his ears touched the ground. "It is true, what they say. Harry Potter is a very great wizard." Harry turned to leave. "But the greatest wizard of our age should know... Caesar is no cook." He bowed again and closed the door.

That night, Harry again said nothing of his pact with Malfoy to Hermione or Ron. When they asked why he rushed off to see Professor McGonagall, he lied and told them it was to ask about Dumbledore. When they asked how the Headmaster was, Harry told the truth and said not well. It was something in the way Professor McGonagall had called out the name Albus that told him that something deeper was wrong. Her face was white and whereas before she would have spoken first with Dumbledore, this time the decision she had made was clearly her own. The Headmaster was ill... very ill.

At breakfast, there had been no word of anything unusual happening in the Wizarding world, but when the three Gryffindor friends entered the Great Hall for lunch that same afternoon they found the room filled with commotion. The Daily Prophet had arrived with a special edition and emblazoned on the headline was "Death Eater Re-Captured". Hermione grabbed a paper on the Gryffindor table and began to read it out loud.

The Ministry of Magic brings one back after Arthur Weasley himself goes on the attack. Early this morning in a brilliant move, the Ministry re-captured You-Know-Who's right hand man, Augustus Rockwood. Found hiding outside of Glenfarg, Rockwood was taken without incident. Mr. Weasley with the help of six other Ministry officials found Rockwood in his sleep.

Rockwood, who had just escaped Azkaban with Lucius Malfoy, was one of the top ten most wanted wizards by the Ministry. "The rest will soon follow," said Thomas Snively, one of the Ministry's spokesmen.

When asked if there was any sign of Lucius Malfoy, Mr. Snively assured the Prophet's reporters that the area had been "completely cleared of all dark wizards."

Hermione glanced up from the paper to find Harry looking across the hall at the Slytherin table. Crabbe was patting Malfoy on the back, offering some sort of assurance, or congratulations, Harry couldn't tell.

"Harry," she called, "I know you hate Malfoy, but it's not worth it. They'll capture his father, you'll see. It's unbelievable that the Prophet doesn't know that Lucius is Voldemort's right hand man."

"He may have slipped through this time, mate," Ron chimed in. "But, you can bet he's running hard now. He'll be living like a wild animal, which for a Malfoy is pretty much normal, I guess."

"Yeah," Harry answered weakly, "I guess." Neither Professor McGonagall, nor Tonks were at the head table.

"Well, they got one of the bastards!" Anthony Goldstein yelled out from the Ravenclaw table. "They'll catch the other snake soon enough!"

"Oh, no," Hermione murmured. "He's going to try and provoke them." Malfoy remained seated, but the Slytherins around him instantly rose to their feet scraping the bench against the stone floor behind them. Immediately, the sound of benches scraping across the stone floor filled the Great Hall as the Ravenclaws stood in answer. Then, Great Hall fell silent.

"Goldstein!" Harry yelled, taking to his feet and walking toward the Ravenclaw table. In the eerie silence his voice seemed to echo off the stone walls and all eyes turned to him. "Who's your money on this week? Hufflepuff or Slytherin?" The two teams were scheduled to play the following weekend and already banners had been going up around the school. With Goyle off the Slytherin team, Hufflepuff was the heavy favorite to win. Anthony looked at Harry with a puzzled expression. "As for me," Harry continued with a smooth, but loud voice, "my money's on Slytherin." There were some murmurs from around the hall and some outright snickers from Hufflepuff. The

smattering of laughter seemed to spread out across the Great Hall in a wave and soon many, other than those at the Slytherin table, were laughing. The tension that was in the air evaporated into nothingness, but Goldstein stood defiantly.

"I have two-hundred galleons," Harry pressed on, now standing nose-to-nose with Anthony, "that say Slytherin wins Saturday." There was a collective gasp, and the murmuring began in earnest.

"Harry!" Hermione called out, but he ignored her.

"That assumes, of course," Harry continued, "Slytherin's starting team actually plays on Saturday." Harry wore a bright, broad smile, but his eyes were cold as they held Goldstein's in their gaze. Then Harry looked up and down at the Ravenclaws still standing before him. "Surely, there are enough Ravenclaws standing here to take the bet?"

For the smallest of moments the room was quiet, waiting for Anthony's reply. But he made none. Then someone from the Hufflepuff table started with "Take the bet." Soon it was repeated and a low rumbling chant began. "Take the bet. Take the bet. Take the bet." Finally, Goldstein could bear it no longer.

"You're on Potter!" he yelled, and the Great Hall erupted in cheers. All except for the six Ravenclaws standing, who now looked at Goldstein as if he were insane. Everyone sat back down except for Harry, who walked over to where Malfoy was seated eating nothing more than a green salad.

"Do you think you can keep from falling off your broom, Malfoy?" he sneered in his nastiest of voices.

"We don't need you to fight our battles for us, Potter," Malfoy snapped back.

"I'm looking to make money, Malfoy," Harry replied shrewdly. "After the match, they can stomp you all to smithereens for all I care." Standing there in the light of day, he noticed that the scar on Malfoy's face had indeed faded from the day before. "It's all about catching your prey, Malfoy, and all you need to do is... catch the Snitch."

"Yeah, you did a great job of that last match, Potter," Crabbe chortled. Harry took a quick step forward and Crabbe recoiled.

"Pathetic," Harry whispered.

When Harry sat down at the Gryffindor table, Ron was the first to be critical.

"You just blew two-hundred galleons, you do know that don't you?"

"There's hope," Harry said weakly.

"Are you kidding?" Ron called back leaning forward on the bench. "They lost two Chasers, Warrington and Montague to graduation and their best Beater plays for Gryffindor. I've been listening to their new captain, Sykes, and his strategy's out of the stone age." He sat back down shaking his head. "Two-hundred galleons."

"The point is Ron," said Hermione while looking around the Great Hall, "everyone's just eating their lunch. Five minutes ago, the hall was about to erupt with wands again. But, look now. No one's fighting or shooting off their wand, are they?" She turned to Harry. "Well spent, I say."

"I can't buy peace forever, Hermione," Harry answered, spearing a potato with his fork. "It's a festering wound just beneath the surface, ever ready to rise up and pop." The potato shot into his mouth. "If we can't bring the houses together in some meaningful way..." he shook his head and speared another potato.

At the Slytherin table on the far end of the hall, Malfoy sat erect and ate his salad, slowly slicing a tomato and placing it in his mouth with his fork. His eyes looked up at Harry and, for just a moment, the two spoke silently across the room. Malfoy reached for a cruet of oil and vinegar, held it up in a hidden toast to Harry, shook it violently, and slowly poured it across his lettuce leaves. Setting the mixture down on the table, Malfoy speared a purple leaf and thrust it in his mouth. Harry lifted his own glass from the table and while no one was watching tilted it in Malfoy's direction.

“Oil and water,” he whispered. “Oil and water.”

Chapter 37 - Diversity of Strength

The moon was full and so bright in the sky that observing gaseous clusters, even with magical telescopes, was impossible. Professor Sinistra had opted, instead, to lecture to the class for most of the lesson and as the evening was coming to an end she turned philosophical, speaking poetically about the intricacies and precision of the universe. She compared the creation to the cogs, gears, and springs of a giant watch that had been set in motion billions of years earlier. "Each small part in the mechanism has its place!" she declared emphatically, but Dean Thomas couldn't help but snicker.

"I think someone's forgotten to wind it lately," he jabbed, and the class laughed. But Professor Sinistra, sitting at her desk in dark, satin-blue robes was unperturbed.

"Precisely, Mr. Thomas!" she exclaimed to everyone's surprise. "The energy of the mechanism has failed. The harmony with which it operates is in discord. The gears now begin to slow and the rhythm of each tick becomes more lethargic. Where once was vitality, darkness rushes to fill the void, spreading despair across the land." She closed her text and stood from her desk. "And where does the energy necessary to operate this grand design come from?" she asked the class.

"The stars?" Parvati asked, and Professor Sinistra smiled slyly.

"The Centaurs believe so, and you would think that, as a student in astronomy class, we should first look outward. But..." she waited.

"Inward," Dean answered, almost pensively.

"Yes, Mr. Thomas?" Professor Sinistra queried. "How do you mean?"

"It's the energy within each of us," he replied, almost questioningly.

"Deeper," she said slowly, walking out onto the parapet, the moon shimmering off her robes. "You are each so similar to the Muggles we live with on this planet and yet you each have an ability to tap into something that Muggles cannot." She walked back in towards Dean.

"It is arrogance to believe that the power is inside here." She tapped Dean's head with her wand. "And it is such arrogance that promises to doom those who would practice the Dark Arts. True energy... pure energy resides not within us, but rather around us all. It is the link that binds us to each other and the world we live in, and when we come to hate the world and its creatures, to hate each other, the energy that holds all living things together begins to fade. Without that energy, we grow weak." At these words, Professor Sinistra's voice seemed to crack.

"I've kept you far too long with my ramblings," she said after taking a deep breath. "I still expect two scrolls on the moons of Jupiter by next week and extra credit for how we might determine the number of planets in a cluster. Class dismissed." She strode over to her desk and sat back down, looking out across the open parapet, the moon's glow turning her face white. Harry picked up his pack and walked over to her.

"Professor," he started, interrupting some thought she was holding in her mind, "how is Professor Dumbledore?" Again, she let out a deep sigh. Everyone in the class had left, leaving the two alone.

"Harry," she said softly, "it is time you knew." She straightened in her chair, but was struggling to meet Harry's eyes with her own. Finally, she looked up and began, "Professor Dumbledore is..."

Suddenly, the earth began to rumble as an earthquake shook the grounds. The castle walls began to pitch violently, candles fell from the chandeliers and portraits fell from the walls. Students exiting the tower began to scream as they tumbled down step after step.

"Is it an attack?" Harry yelled above the rumble, as he tried to reach for his wand. But, as quickly as it began, it stopped. The only sound was the scattering of dust and pebbles as they slid down the outside of the castle walls toward the grounds, and the rustle of leafless branches in the night's breeze. Professor Sinistra was clearly agitated.

"No, Mr. Potter, everything is fine," she snapped as she reached for her cloak and strode out of the classroom. "It is not an attack... yet!" she yelled, brandishing her wand and disappearing out the door.

It took Harry a moment to find his bearings. Alone in the darkened classroom, he walked out onto the parapet and looked across the grounds. The moon shimmered brightly off the Whomping Willow, but Harry saw nothing out of the ordinary. He began to turn when the corner of his eye saw movement. Towards Hagrid's cabin he could make out the back end of Firenze and, as he strained his ears, he could make out hushed whispers. It sounded like Hagrid, but Harry couldn't be sure. Pounding his hoof, Firenze seemed to be cross. Harry strained to hear, but unable to make out the conversation he left.

As he walked back to the common room, he heard many students talk about the earthquake, but, oddly, the professors he passed seemed not to care. Only Professor Flitwick seemed rather irritated as he raced down the corridor wearing an expression much the same as Professor Sinistra. Passing through the portrait of the Fat Lady, the Gryffindor common room was abuzz with activity, everyone talking about what had just happened. Most were retelling what they saw fall from the walls or ceiling. Ron was sharing his near death experience from almost being hit by the falling portrait of Sir Cadogan the Knight.

Halfway through Ron's story, which included some rather choice words from Sir Cadogan, Harry decided he had heard enough. Smiling to himself, he slipped his pack from off his shoulder and started for the boys' dormitory. As he walked passed a large standing lamp, Ginny saw him and her eyes lit up.

"Harry!" she cried out. "Thank goodness you're safe. I was so worried." She reached over and gave him a light hug. No sooner had her arms wrapped around Harry, than Dean appeared stepping down the stairs from the dormitory above. "I thought maybe, Voldemort... maybe he'd come." Ginny's eyes flickered with fear and Harry took her hand in his.

"Not at Hogwarts, Ginny," Harry replied with a warm smile. "He won't be coming here, I promise. You'll see; we'll take the battle to old snakeface." Dean stepped down and strode over to the two and pulled Ginny's hand out of Harry's.

"The only battle you need to worry about, Potter," Dean snapped coolly, "is with me!"

"Dean," Ginny exclaimed, "it's not what you think!"

"It never is... is it Gin?" Dean snapped back. "But he's always sliming around trying to get his hands on you." At this point, a good portion of the common room had turned to see what was going on. At first Harry felt apologetic and wanted to explain that nothing was going on, but then some sense of resentment, or jealousy began to grow like wildfire inside, and he found himself flashing to anger, and then inexplicably to hatred.

"And what," Harry said, stepping forward and putting his face directly in front of Dean's, "do you intend to do about it, Thomas?" The 'T' splattered Dean's face with phlegm.

"Harry," Ginny pleaded, but he was ignoring her now. His mind was burning with pure hatred toward the adversary in front of him. But Dean refused to back down, and drew closer to Harry, their noses nearly touching.

"Draw your wand," Dean sneered in a whisper.

"I already have," Harry whispered back, placing his right hand on Dean's chest. He leaned forward to Dean's left ear and whispered again, "Adficio Cruris!" Instantly, Dean's legs turned to jelly and he fell to the floor. Dean, stumbling around, tried to reach for his wand, but kept losing his balance. The common room erupted in laughter, but Harry wasn't smiling. When Dean finally had his hands on his wand, Harry had his own pointed in Dean's face.

"Please, Dean," Harry said loud enough for all to hear. "You've made such an ass of yourself already, perhaps I should turn you into one." Word had already passed around that Harry had turned Goyle into a frog, and for a moment Dean thought Harry actually might do it. His eyes grew large; he dropped his wand to the floor and started to use his hands to push himself backwards away from Harry, who followed

him with his wand pointed directly at his face. When Dean's back ran up against the wall, he began to tremble.

"Turn him into an ass, Harry!" someone yelled from across the room. But the idea of turning Dean into an ass had past. No, Harry, or some dark part of Harry, had already decided -- Dean must die. It was the only way to truly protect Ginny. Slowly and deliberately he raised his wand.

"Harry, please stop!" Ginny yelled, and the words stayed Harry's hand. Seeing his dorm-mate at his feet wriggling with fear, he suddenly felt the anger ebb away as if a cool breeze had just passed through an open window and woken him from a strange dream.

"Deletrius!" Harry called out, removing the Jelly-Leg Jinx. He wanted to say he was sorry and reach out to Dean, but the look of fright he saw staring back at him pushed him away. He turned to see smiles around the room except for Ginny; she looked as if she didn't recognize him. He went over, picked his pack off the floor, and strode up the stairs, two steps at a time.

In the dormitory, Goyle was in bed reading by candlelight. Harry sat on his own bed and found himself trembling. He held his hands out and realized that the scar on his arm had appeared again, the familiar ache was marching its way up toward his neck.

"What was Dean yelling about?" Goyle asked calmly as he turned a page on the book he was reading. Harry remained silent. "Don't tell me you had your hands on Ginny again," Goyle said, placing the book down and rubbing his eyes. Harry again said nothing, but he looked up at Goyle and his own eyes answered. "You do know, Harry, that Dean's tremendously insecure where Ginny and you are concerned. He was just talking to me about it. He knows she had a crush on you and now all he can think about is that he'll lose her to you." Goyle sat upright. "You're quite the playboy, Harry: private flying lessons for Cho, extravagant diamonds for Hermione, and a secret rendezvous in the owlery with Ginny. The last thing he needs is to see you two touching. Which, I might add, you seem to do a lot."

Goyle picked his book back up and leaned against his pillow. For a second, all was silent and then Harry took to his feet.

"I do not touch her!" he snapped. Goyle only raised his eyebrows and returned to his book. "I mean, we're friends... that's all." Harry began to pace. "She's my friend and friends help each other out, right?" Harry was looking for affirmation, but Goyle was silent. "You wouldn't understand; it's complicated."

"I wouldn't?" Goyle asked sarcastically, not looking up from his book. Harry paused, and then strode over to Goyle. He grabbed his book and threw it to the ground.

"No! No you wouldn't!" Harry yelled. "She was possessed by Voldemort. Do you know what that's like, Greg? Do you? Do you know what it's like to lose control of yourself and have an appetite for pure evil coursing through your very being? Do you know what it's like thirsting to see people tortured, their minds ruined, and then put to death -- IF-THEY'RE-LUCKY?" Goyle's eyes began to widen and the colour began to leave his face, but Harry wouldn't relent. It was bursting forth from him now and Goyle, alone with Harry in the boys' dormitory, would hear it all.

"Do you understand what it means to lose control of your mind, your soul, and to wish for your own death just to make the pain of his presence end?" Harry leaned in to Goyle, who was now, much as Dean had done earlier, pulling himself away from Harry.

"Ginny knows!" Harry fired. He walked back to his own bed and his shoulders slumped. "Ginny understands," he whispered, and sat back down and rubbed his forehead. "It's a scar we both share and if Dean can't handle it, too damn bad!" Harry tossed himself back on his bed and stared up at the ceiling. After a moment of silence, Goyle gathered himself together and got out of bed to retrieve his book.

"Potter!" Dean's voice rang out as his footsteps could be heard ascending the staircase. He entered the dormitory with his wand drawn, but the instant he stepped toward Harry's bed, Goyle grabbed him by the front of his shirt and lifted him against the wall.

“Not in here, Thomas,” he said sternly, “and not tonight; put it away.” Slowly, Dean slid his wand back into his jeans and as he did so, Goyle slid him down the wall to set him on his feet. Still holding Dean by the front of his shirt, Goyle continued, “Harry’s writing a letter to his girlfriend, who, you should know, isn’t Ginny Weasley. When are you going to get it through your skull that they’re just friends? Everybody can see that, except you.” Goyle released Dean’s shirt and took a half step back. “Why don’t you go downstairs and come back when your head is on straight?” Dean tried to look over Goyle’s broad shoulders to see what Harry was really doing. “Take her down to the kitchens for some treacle tarts; you know they’re her favorite.” Dean, unable to see past Goyle, turned and went back downstairs without saying a word.

“Thanks,” Harry said, still looking at the ceiling. Goyle looked down the staircase then turned and leaned against the wall.

“Harry... I’ve seen the fear he burned into my dad’s eyes,” Goyle answered in a small voice. “I guess I never thought... I never knew he... I’m sorry.” Without saying anything more, Goyle went back over to his bed and began reading again. Taking Goyle’s lead, Harry rolled over and grabbed his pack hoping that homework might take his mind off the remnants of anger still roiling inside him, but looking at star charts didn’t help. He tossed them to the floor and walked over to his desk.

“It’s time for another meeting, I think,” he said out loud with a bit of excitement in his voice. He reached into a drawer and pulled out a golden coin. After a few adjustments, he slid it back into the drawer. “There,” he said with satisfaction as he fell back onto his bed. Let’s see what sort of showing we get now we know the Dark Lord’s out to snatch Hogwarts students.” He slipped off his glasses and into bed, but his eyes remained open for most of the night.

The next evening, Harry arrived early to the Room of Requirement just to ensure nothing had changed. It was exactly as he had hoped, with one noted exception. Already in the room browsing the bookshelves was Tonks. She was bent low looking at the bottom row of texts and when she saw Harry she flashed him a smile and stood, slowly stretching her back and holding her sides with her hands. She

had been moving around in class without any noticeable difficulty, but her face seemed more tired than Harry had ever seen it before. This evening, she wore dark robes and short black hair that spiked up and her skin glowed pale, almost ghostlike.

"Hi, Harry," she said stretching her spine from side to side. "Still a bit stiff, but getting better," she answered anticipating Harry's question. "I was hoping you'd get here a bit early; I wanted to talk to you alone." For an instant, Harry's heart skipped. But his mind turned it toward Neville and the need to find his friend came to the fore.

"Hermione and I were talking at lunch," Harry said eagerly. "We were thinking they might be hold up at the old Riddle house. Maybe you could..."

"We've been watching that dilapidated property and the surrounding farmland for months, Harry. It was the first place I suggested we look." Tonks walked over to Harry and held his hand as they stood together among the stacks of books. Her touch again quickened Harry's heart, but he didn't know why. "I wanted to talk about you, Harry," she said softly. "You seem distracted in class... more than usual," she said gently. "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Harry's heart began to race and he could feel his pulse pounding in his ears. He unexpectedly felt very warm and he was sure she'd notice. His thoughts were swiftly swirling. She seemed, somehow, more beautiful tonight, more fragile, more desirable. Harry hesitated at first and then he felt compelled to tell her all he had kept secret these past few months. He'd been aching to confide in someone who would truly understand, and he somehow knew she would.

"Tonks," he started, "you should know that..." A flash of pain streaked up his right arm, and his face winced. He knew the scar which was absent at breakfast had returned, only this time the pain seemed to drive a dart through his skull. Harry staggered backwards feeling as if he were under attack.

"Harry, what is it?" Tonks asked reaching her hand to his arm. But, Harry instinctively pulled his arm away, backing further. He reached up, took his glasses off, and rubbed his face with his hand. The pain

began to recede just as the door to the room opened and in walked a number of students from Ravenclaw including Luna, Cho and Anthony. Anthony had his hand on Cho's arm as they stepped through the door, and seeing the two together Harry felt a faint pang of jealousy.

"I'm fine, Tonks, really. Er, thanks," he said over his shoulder, and he started over to talk to Cho, but Luna cut him off.

"Hi, Harry!" she called with an exceptionally loud voice. She was only a few feet from Harry and continued to scream out. "What's the plan for tonight!"

"Why are you yelling, Luna?" Harry asked, his eyes on Anthony and Cho as they walked over to speak with Tonks.

"Clearing out the Fenticulitis!" she continued to yell. "Dad says to clear them out once a month, or they'll become unmanageable!"

"Clearing what?" Harry found himself yelling back for no reason.

"Excellent, Harry! Exactly!" Luna screamed as the door opened and more students began to flood in. Harry shook his head and smiled. Luna was an extraordinarily different person, but then, who at Hogwarts wasn't? They were each unique in their own way and as he watched more students pass through the door he realized that it was their differences that would make them strong. Voldemort demanded conformity to his will and, for the first time, Harry saw a weakness he could exploit and a strength he could develop. He weaved his way to the center of the open chamber and began the meeting.

"Today," he called out, "I want everyone to concentrate on the one thing they're really good at. Concentrate on turning your greatest strength to its greatest benefit. Pair up, one-on-one, or in groups and come up with your own ways to put your strengths to use." Everyone began to murmur, but nobody seemed to move. Finally, Tonks called out.

"Goyle!" she hailed, pointing her wand at the largest student in the group. "Your stunner is the most powerful in this whole room, but

you're lucky to hit the side of a barn. Go over to the forest and have a large group come at you. Rather than attack them one-by-one, see if you can stop them all in one go!" Then she turned to Ron. "Mr. Weasley! You seem to have a knack for anticipating your opponent's next move. Take two groups to the town and help defend your group as they're attacked by the other group in door-to-door combat."

"If you're having trouble coming up with ideas," Harry added, "Tonks and I will be walking around to help." But, before long, Dumbledore's Army was running on autopilot. They were using the entire room for the first time and while they were working hard there were also a lot of smiles. By the end of the meeting, everyone was talking about how it was their best practice ever. Tonks left early with Madame Guérir whispering to Harry that they needed to talk more later. Ron and Hermione stayed after to help finish cleaning up.

"That was a blast, mate," Ron said, flying cushions back against the far wall.

"Absolutely! A great idea tonight, Harry," Hermione commended. "I think it's the first time everyone seemed to be performing as one."

"And they were all doing something different," said Harry, happy it had worked. He reached down, picked up a book, and slid it into the lower shelf; his mind turned to earlier in the evening. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Hermione replied.

Harry told the two of them about what had happened with Tonks and how he had reacted. "I don't know why I reacted that way. But..." he hesitated. "It wouldn't be the first Defense Against the Dark Arts professor that turned sour."

"Hey, mate," Ron grinned. "If she held my hand that way, I'd turn three shades of red too. She was looking pretty hot tonight if you ask me."

"Nobody's asking you," Hermione shot with a steely glance and Ron found he didn't need to hold Tonks' hand to turn a deep shade of red.

Then she turned to Harry and said softly, "You're over-thinking, is all, Harry. Tonks just wants to help; she's always had a soft spot for you." Hermione looked at Ron. "But not in that way."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Harry answered, and the three left the Room of Requirement not speaking of it further.

Chatting about the meeting they made their way back to the Gryffindor common room, but the mood was instantly spoiled when their paths crossed Draco Malfoy. He was seated lengthwise on a bench, his boots up on the cushions, and his back against a pillar. He was reading a scroll of some sort and he raised his eyes for only a moment to look at the trio and then continued reading. Hermione grabbed Ron's shirt and tried to keep him moving, but he couldn't remain silent.

"Spying again, Malfoy," Ron sneered stepping toward the bench. "Are you worried? We're getting more Slytherins to join every meeting and your watching in the outer corridor isn't going to stop that."

"Just reading a letter from home, Weasles," Malfoy drawled. "It appears that the Ministry's growing concerned about that tottering old fool of a Headmaster. If he isn't better by next term, it looks like they're going to replace him."

"What?" Hermione exclaimed. "They wouldn't dare."

"Oh, but they would," Malfoy sneered with a twisted smile, turning to sit straight on the bench. "Not that a mudblood would understand the ways of true wizards." Hearing the words, Ron pulled his wand.

"No!" Harry yelled, stopping him. "Let me!" And Harry pulled his own wand.

"Three on one," Malfoy drawled again, "just your kind of odds, Potter."

"Let's take it outside, then," Harry challenged with contempt in his voice. "Alone."

“Harry, no,” said Hermione, reaching for his arm. “You know you shouldn’t be out at...”

“Afraid of the dark!” Malfoy laughed, and Hermione realized she had said the wrong thing.

“You two can go,” Harry said sternly. “This is between Malfoy and me. It’s time we finally settle this.” The blonde stood to his feet and with one hand pulled his wand, while the other hand stroked the scar on his face. Hermione looked at Harry and then to Ron.

“Let’s go,” she whispered.

“But...” Ron began.

“Let’s go!” she repeated, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him down the corridor.

“The side door’s this way, Draco.” Harry said quietly, still holding his wand in hand. The two didn’t speak until they had made their way out onto the castle grounds. The air was cold, and the night sky dark and starless. The two stood under a torch at the castle’s side entrance, each chilled, and then Malfoy slipped his wand back into his robes.

“Well, Potter,” he began, “is it time to shake things up a bit?” Harry was silent, but slowly, with trepidation, he nodded. Malfoy smiled like a child at Christmas. “I believe we agreed... you owe me a sign of your own,” he challenged. “The earring... is it from Chang? Granger?” Harry held his hand to the silver dangling from his ear. He was not ready to reveal Gabriella to Malfoy, not yet, perhaps not ever.

“Something better, I think,” Harry said quietly. Malfoy looked intrigued and stepped closer.

“Well?” he asked with anticipation. Harry reached down and pulled up the sleeve of his robes. The constant throbbing of his right arm all through the DA meeting had been calling to him, reminding him that the scar was still there and now, even by torchlight, the sword and the snake were clearly visible, raised and red against Harry’s forearm.

"We share something more than a common hatred of Voldemort," Harry whispered. Malfoy reached forward and took Harry by the arm, looking at the scar intently.

"You did this to yourself?" Malfoy asked in disbelief. "And then to me? Why?"

"I wanted you to understand what it means to be different, Draco. What it means to be stared at... an outcast of your own people. You search for ways to belittle any who don't match your perfect world."

"Perfect world?" Malfoy howled. "Potter, you know nothing of what it means to be truly different. Scars bring stares and silent whispers, but still the Slytherins gather to my side and the Gryffindors gather at yours. Only someone like your pal Lupin understands what it means to be reviled for what you truly are." He squeezed and his fingers dug into Harry's forearm. "You... you have no hope of understanding what it means to be... that I'm..." he stopped, watching the scar on Harry's arm slowly fade before his eyes.

"What trickery are you trying to pull, Potter!" he spat, thrusting the arm back at his nemesis. Harry raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders almost apologetically.

"Mine fades," he said without blinking at Malfoy and rubbing his arm. But Malfoy's eyes were disbelieving. "I swear!" Still, Malfoy was having none of it. Harry searched his mind for another demonstration and then he grinned to himself. "Truly different, Draco?" asked Harry as he reached over and picked a hair off of Malfoy's shirt. "The trips to Hogsmeade... it's not Polyjuice potion." Stepping from torchlight into the darkness, Harry transformed into the very likeness of Draco Malfoy, who stood dumbstruck staring at his own face.

"A Metamorphmagus!" he breathed. "It can't be." For a moment, Malfoy stood motionless and then, slowly, he put his hand to the scar now on Harry's face and traced it with his fingers; Harry didn't move. "So this is what it looks like," Malfoy whispered. His touch was soft, but his fingers cold as they ran their way down the shape of the sword hanging from Harry's left eye. Harry stood in silence as he

looked back into Malfoy's stunned face. "Does it burn?" Malfoy asked, already knowing the answer.

"When it flares onto my arm it does," Harry drawled and hearing his own voice, Malfoy stepped back. Then, unexpectedly, his steel eyes smiled.

"In class... your red eyes... of course," he whispered. Malfoy held Harry by the arm. "We can use this, Harry. Yes, we can use this. Who else knows?"

"Tonks," Harry said in a distorted voice as he transformed back; the name bothered Malfoy. "Tonks and..." he hesitated. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"Don't tell me... Weasles," he groaned. "What you see in that..."

"Loyalty," Harry cut in, "and friendship. Don't forget, Draco, I've been you. Tell me who you have to compare, because I haven't seen them."

"Bl-... nobody," Malfoy said flatly, and then he leaned in close. "You say you've been me. That's only partly true. You've been the part of me that everybody sees. Tell me, Harry, when you walk into a crowded store, what happens?" Without waiting for an answer, Malfoy answered himself. "The crowd splits apart, that's what happens. That's called respect, Harry, and I'll take that over friendship any day."

"Fear is what it is, Draco, and when your father's back in jail and Voldemort's destroyed who then will they fear? Who then will they... respect?" Without hesitating, Malfoy answered.

"The two Hogwarts students that vanquished the Great Lord Voldemort, Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter," breathed the blonde in a cold voice. "Malfoy and Potter." The words sent shivers down Harry's spine, shivers that remained with him as he tried to clear his mind that night before falling asleep.

He remembered his first trip to Diagon Alley, passing through the Leaky Cauldron. "Bless my soul. Harry Potter... what an honor," they said. "So proud, Mr. Potter, I'm just so proud," they praised, bowing their heads in deference. How much lower would they bow knowing he had defeated the Dark Lord again? Only now, he would soon be of age and possibly capable of destroying any who would oppose him. At least, that's if he lived. Harry's heart quickened, as his mind began to slip into a fog.

"Come again, Mr. Potter, come again," the clerk said, bowing low to the ground as Harry gathered his goods. "It was certainly my pleasure." Harry turned to leave the crowded store and as he did so the sea of people parted to let him pass. A small child ran to take his hand in gratitude, but Harry shoved him aside.

"Kindness is a weakness," he thought. "Draco taught me that." He strode forward and pushed open the shop door, but instead of emerging out into the street, he walked onto a patch of green grass. At his feet, flowed the water of a small stream that wound its way around a hill and Harry, borne by an urge he did not understand, began to follow it. The air was cool and the day bright, but the shade of the surrounding trees cast a dim filter over all he saw. His pace was quick and his breath billowed from his mouth in large plumes. Unexpectedly, he came to an immense cropping of stone blocks, which seemed unnatural, almost hewn, into which the stream plunged and disappeared. A voice, ancient and wise, began to grow, emanating from the stones or perhaps his own mind, until it erupted with an unexpected power.

"No!" Harry yelled. "It is not a weakness!" His words disappeared into the stillness of the surrounding trees. He fell to his knees watching the cool clear water flow by. "What have I done?" he whispered. "What evil has taken me?" And, without reason, Harry reached down to splash his face with the water that passed into nothingness. Instantly, the crack into which the water disappeared grew to the size of a large crevasse. He lost his balance and began to fall into the gaping fissure.

With a start, he woke and found himself drenched in sweat on the floor next to the bed. The room was cool, dark, and quiet; the side of

his head ached from hitting something hard on the way down. His dorm-mates made no sound, oblivious, Harry thought thankfully, to his nightmare. "But, what was the nightmare?" he wondered, as he crawled back into bed.

"This isn't the way," he whispered, as his damp body began to shiver again in the cool air. "This can't be the way."

"It's the only way," a cold voice whispered in his ear. "The only way."

Chapter 38 - And Then There Were Two

"Come on, Hermione!" Ron yelled, adjusting his jacket and heading through the portrait of the Fat Lady with Harry. "We'll miss the opening toss!"

The day of Hufflepuff's match with Slytherin had arrived and Gryffindor Tower was already emptied; everyone had left to watch the two houses face-off. A day of Quidditch always offered a welcome diversion from day-to-day studies, but this afternoon's match was imbued with added excitement: Harry's two-hundred galleon challenge with the Ravensclaws that Slytherin would win. Harry had sent post to Remus asking if he would bring the gold and Remus, who had been looking for a reason to visit, agreed. He found Harry in the Great Hall just after breakfast and, as others watched, dropped the heavy purple pouch into Harry's hand.

"A pretty hefty price just to stop a food fight," Remus said sternly. Harry simply shrugged his shoulders. Remus mustered a grin, but there was worry on his brow. "I must see the Headmaster, Harry. I'll meet you after the match; maybe we can get a bite to eat in Hogsmeade. I don't think he'll mind." For a moment, a flash of sadness seeped into Remus' eyes, but it evaporated into a hopeful smile.

"I'd like that," said Harry, smiling back. He watched as Remus left the Great Hall and he wondered what his father's friend would find after he ascended the circular staircase.

Now, following Ron through the portrait of the Fat Lady, a purple pouch hanging from his side, Harry's mind was consumed with the fact that they were late for the match.

"Come on, Hermione!" Harry called out, echoing Ron's summons.

Since breakfast, she had been very quiet, even more disinterested in conversations of Quidditch than normal. Now she stood in the center of the common room, looking almost embarrassed.

"Hermione!" Ron pleaded.

"She's not coming," Harry said in a soft voice to Ron. Then turning to Hermione, he asked, "Why?" For a moment she could not look their way, and bit at her nail.

"I've got some extra homework to do and..."

"Homework!" Ron erupted. "Harry's about to lose two-hundred galleons and you have homework to do?" He started to step forward, but Harry held him back. He'd seen the look in her face too many times not to recognize it... she was hiding something again. Ron was just too polite to read her mind.

"Come on, Ron," he said. "She's up to something and we're not in on it." For a moment Ron looked back, then shrugged his shoulders and turned to walk away.

"I'm not saving you a seat!" he called back and then softer, "Not that we'll be able to find any ourselves."

The game was underway by the time Harry and Ron arrived on the pitch. Hufflepuff was up sixty-to-twenty, and Ron yelped with a cheer as he saw the score, but quickly checked his enthusiasm.

"I mean, hoorah, good to see Slytherin's not down too far, eh mate?"

"I know you want Hufflepuff to win, Ron," said Harry. "It doesn't matter to me." But inside, it did matter. He searched the sky for Malfoy and found him far over on the south end of the pitch. Malfoy was flying much higher than the Hufflepuff Seeker, Summerby, too high Harry thought, should the Snitch appear near the field. The thought of a low flying Snitch caused Harry to search himself near the frozen turf, but he saw nothing. What did catch his eye was a large, unwieldy green serpent in the Ravenclaw stands on the other side of the pitch. Luna and Marietta seemed to be trying to get it to breathe fire, but it was only able to manage a few feeble sparks. Once again, Luna had brought a smile to Harry's face.

"Come on, Harry," Ron called out. "There are two spots over here." For a second, Harry hesitated. The open seats were next to Dean

and Ginny who were both looking to the sky above. But there were no other openings, so, reluctantly, Harry followed Ron and made sure the redhead sat between he and Dean. Ron pointed to Sykes, the Slytherin Captain. "Look at that idiot! He's flying way too..." The crowd cut him off with a groan. Crabbe had just bashed a Bludger straight into Zacharias Smith, who plummeted to the ground. "Hufflepuff doesn't have another Chaser!" Ron yelled with worried excitement.

Indeed, Smith had been carrying the Quaffle, which was scooped up by Slytherin's Pucey who scored an instant later. Still, even a Chaser down, Hufflepuff continued to pull away as the afternoon wore on. Both Harry and Ron had expected Slytherin to start their more underhanded tactics as the score started to slip away, but instead they seemed to play with more speed than brawn. Ron turned to Goyle who was seated only a few feet away. "They're trying to fly faster. Where, I wonder, did they get that idea?" Goyle just looked at Ron with a smile and shrugged his shoulders innocently.

The tactic seemed to work. Hufflepuff had been playing mostly a defensive flying strategy all day, anticipating Slytherin's attacks. When they didn't happen, the team started to become confused. Instead of crashing at the Hufflepuff Chasers, Slytherin was picking at the Chasers with the Quaffle and by mid-afternoon the tide began to turn. It was the longest game Harry had ever seen at Hogwarts. Malfoy and Summerby continued to scour the field for the Snitch and when they passed by the Gryffindor seats, the frustration on their faces was evident. Harry, however, began to notice that Summerby was growing tired. The last few times he flew by he would glance at the crowd, almost looking for something to do other than hunt for the Snitch. Malfoy, to the contrary, remained steely-eyed, searching for the Snitch and oblivious to everything around him. So much so, in fact, that a Bludger nearly took him off his broom from behind, only Malfoy, at the last instant, ducked as the Bludger glanced over his head. "Curious," Harry thought.

The air grew cool, as the sun began to set. Floating torches blazed around the pitch so that the players and the fans could all see. "I'm hungry," Ron growled. "A man needs more to survive than hopping hot dogs. You'd think one of them would catch the bloody thing by

now.” Slytherin had pulled close and were down only 360 to 400, but the players were clearly all exhausted.

Sykes was near the Gryffindor stands when he yelled at Crabbe. “I’m gonna call time-out!” A second later he started to fly toward Madame Hooch, positioned at the south-center of the field. No sooner had he started than there was a collective gasp, a shudder, and then a cheer.

“There it is!” someone yelled. Harry looked up to see everyone pointing to the other side of the field. The flash of gold instantly caught his eye. Low to the ground, only inches above the turf, the Snitch was hovering, almost daring the Seekers to catch it. Both Seekers darted for their target, but as they did so, the Snitch, zipped toward the south.

“It’s gone!” Ron cried out, almost in despair. But it hadn’t gone. Harry could see it flying faster than he’d ever seen it fly, only a few inches above the ground. Based on the wind, Malfoy had the better position, if only he saw. Summerby, who arrived at where the Snitch had been hovering just an instant before, turned to the crowd hoping to get a vector on where it had gone. Harry glanced at Summerby, and then back to Malfoy.

“Come on Draco,” he whispered under his breath. “See.” Malfoy was flying fast from the south end and, as the Snitch passed under his broom, he lowered his hand uncurling his fingers from the wrist. The movement was hardly noticeable and most eyes were on Summerby at the middle of the field. Madame Hooch blew the whistle.

“What?” Ron asked shooting his head back and forth. “What happened?”

“He caught it,” Harry shot out emphatically, pumping his fist. “Draco, caught the Snitch!”

“Draco?” Ron asked, looking at Harry. “But...” Ron looked up only to see Malfoy flying to the center of the field, holding the golden ball in his hands. “Merlin’s beard.” Malfoy was surrounded in a swirl of green, as cheers rang out all around the pitch. And then a chant began to start from the Slytherin stands.

"The Eagle bets against the snake;

The Lion now, their gold will take!"

The two verses started quietly, but then were picked up by all of Slytherin, and then Gryffindor. Soon Hufflepuff was chanting too. Harry tried to raise his arms to quiet the Gryffindor side, but it was hopeless, as the chant continued while the stands emptied.

"Let's eat," said Ron grinning, slapping Harry on the shoulder. "I knew it all the time, Slytherin was a shoe-in; let's collect our money."

"Our money?" Harry asked, but Ron simply smiled and started down the steps toward the castle. Harry began to follow when a hand grabbed his shoulder. Reaching for his wand, he spun only to find Remus Lupin looking back at him.

"Whoa!" said Remus, staring down the end of Harry's wand. "Looks like someone's gotten a bit jumpy since he left for school." The green-eyed Gryffindor dropped his wand immediately and slipped it back into his cloak.

"Sorry, Remus," he said looking around and hoping nobody had seen his silliness. "Things have been a little crazy around here." They began to descend the steps together.

"Yes," replied Remus, "I suspect it has." His tone was soft and melancholy and Harry wondered what had caused the sadness that seemed to surround him. Harry deliberately slowed his pace to ensure the stands emptied before them and soon they found themselves alone, at the end of a long line heading back toward the castle.

"Sir, can we talk?" Harry asked, motioning toward a small alcove behind one of the stands.

"Sir?" Remus chided. "I thought we'd gotten past that, Harry, and I would hope by now you'd know we could always talk." They moved toward the alcove and away from the crowd. "In fact," Remus

continued, "I've been rather disappointed... only two owls all term." The tone in Remus' voice reminded Harry a bit of Sirius' and a pang of guilt tugged at Harry's insides.

"I know," Harry said in a small voice. "I just..." Harry slumped back against the stone wall draped with the crimson and gold tapestry of the Gryffindor stands. He couldn't seem to find the words. For weeks he'd been trying to fight, or lead, or love, or... something. He had just won two-hundred galleons, but there was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach and whether it was because Dumbledore was ill, or because he'd made a pact with Draco, or because the voices had been entering his head again, he didn't know. "I just..." but he lost the words, again.

Remus leaned against the wall with Harry, but said nothing. With their feet, they scraped at a frozen patch of snow as the evening's darkness grew around them. The night was still and silent save for the crackle from the torches encircling the emptied pitch. Finally, Harry began to speak. At first it was a trickle, but soon everything gushed out in a fury. He told of the accident in Little Whinging, the stunning of the policeman, and the scar on his arm. He described how the house elves could see a mark or aura around him, but no one else could. He told him of his dreams, and his fears about Neville. The only thing he held hidden which he felt no one would understand was his pact with Malfoy. Throughout, Remus said nothing, he simply listened, and nodded. Harry finished and waited for the judgments or the exclamations. He was nervous of what Remus would think and he suddenly felt very cold. Remus stood and looked at Harry, putting his arm around his shoulder.

"I hated my sixth year," he said in a whimsical voice. "Your father and Sirius seemed to be discovering new abilities each and every week. Some they liked and some they didn't." He smiled thinking back to his days at Hogwarts. "Just after Christmas holiday, Sirius developed a nasty flu and every time he sneezed, his nose would grow whiskers," Remus laughed and so did Harry. "Your father developed a knack for enchanting objects. We all came up with the idea behind the Marauder's Map, but it was your father who made it work. Sirius and I worked out some of the more comical bits." Remus held his head

high and sighed as the stars began to fleck the darkening sky. "I miss them."

"They'd all still be here, if it weren't for me," Harry whispered to the darkness.

"Don't say that!" snapped Remus. "Don't ever say that! You meant more to your father and mother than you can possibly imagine." He walked over behind the stands and looked back at the Forbidden Forest. "Before you, Harry, they..." he took a deep breath. "You completed them. Through you, they found love... true love." He came over and held Harry by the shoulders. "The night you saved Peter, both Sirius and I saw the same compassion you brought to your mother and father at birth. It was as if you'd given the gift anew to two old men who had found nothing but hate in the world."

Harry wasn't quite sure what to say. He'd never spoken much about his parents with Remus. But now, it seemed that the time was right to ask the questions that had gnawed at him for so long and hear the answers that Remus had been waiting patiently to give. The moment the thought entered his mind, however, his forehead erupted in pain doubling him over to the ground.

"Your scar?" Remus asked coolly reaching down to help him up. Harry nodded when a large siren blared across the castle grounds -- three short bursts that nearly pierced the eardrums and then a voice that told Harry instantly trouble was at hand.

"All students are to return to their dormitories at once!" Professor McGonagall's words rang out in every direction. Prefects are to ensure that all students are in their dormitories immediately." Alone, and in the dark, both Harry and Remus pulled their wands to the ready.

"Come on, Harry," Remus said, looking in every direction. "I'll walk you back." Cautiously, the two made their way to the castle without incident. Once inside, they found no professors and only a handful of students in the corridors, and those were running toward their dormitories. They made their way up the stone staircases, and as Remus was about to walk Harry into Gryffindor through the Fat Lady,

Professor McGonagall emerged headed the other way. Her face was ashen, but when she saw Harry some of her burden was lifted.

“Bless Merlin,” she sighed, seeing the two wizards approach.

“What is it Minerva?” Remus asked. “How can I help?” Professor McGonagall cast a look over at Harry, and then spoke to Remus.

“Another student has been taken,” she sighed. “All the professors are out searching, but I fear we are too late. I thought, perhaps, you too, Harry,” her voice cracked and for the briefest moment Harry thought she was about to cry. But, in the next instant, the expression passed and her face was stern, her eyes determined. “Professor Tonks and Sinistra have gone to Hogsmeade in an effort to detect any unusual apparitions and I’m sure they could use your help, Remus.”

“What about Albus? Surely...” started Remus. Harry caught the look Professor McGonagall had given to stop him short. “Of course. I’ll help anyway I can, Minerva. Harry, we’ll talk more soon. Please, stay in the castle.” The two professors began to hurry down the corridor, while Harry started for the portrait. Before he entered, however, he called back.

“Professor! Which student?”

“Luna Lovegood, I’m afraid. She was last seen with Marietta, trying to get that contraption of theirs to work behind the stands. Marietta’s lost her mind and Luna... well, Luna’s gone.” Professor McGonagall held her hand to her face, turned, and quickly paced down the corridor with Remus at her side.

When Harry entered the common room, he was stunned by its silence. Everyone seemed to be staring blankly at the walls. Hermione saw him and shrieked.

“HARRY! YOU’RE OKAY!” She squeezed him so hard he couldn’t breathe. “Luna’s gone missing and when they called everyone back and you weren’t here, we all thought...”

"I told her you were okay, mate," Ron called out from across the room, but when Harry looked over, he could tell that some of the colour was still missing from his friend's face. With Harry's appearance, however, the conversation in the common room began to pick up. Soon, everyone was talking about Luna, but in the far corner of the room Hermione, Ron, and Harry huddled.

"Anthony found Marietta in one of the classrooms," Hermione began. "She was just like Helen. Whoever took Luna is the same witch that took Neville."

"Or wizard," added Ron. Hermione looked at Ron to say something, but then stopped. "And he must be getting in during the Quidditch matches," Ron asserted. "That'll be it for open matches; that's for sure."

"Forget about open matches, Ron," Harry said grimly. "With two students taken from Hogwarts, parents are going to start taking their kids back home." Hermione's face fell.

"Harry's right, Ron. If we don't find out who's doing this, they might close the school. With the talk about Dumbledore dying, parents are going to lose trust that he can keep us safe."

"He can't," Harry added. "I've killed him." He stood to walk away from his friends, when Hermione took his hand.

"You haven't killed anybody, Harry," she scolded. "If he told you he was getting better, he is. You have to believe."

"I have to find Neville and Luna," Harry shot back. He held her hand in both of his and his features grew stern. "He wants me to find them, Hermione. I'm going to let him tell me where they are." Harry let go and started towards the staircase to the boys' dormitory.

"Harry, wait!" Hermione yelled, and with her words the common room fell silent.

"Wait?" Harry yelled back. "That's all I've done since they killed Sirius! Wait at home, Harry! Wait in hiding, Harry! Wait at Hogwarts, Harry!"

He started to climb the stairs. "He's taken two students because of me... two of my friends. I'm through waiting!"

By the time Harry entered his dormitory, his blood was boiling. "Wait!" he hissed under his breath. "I'll show them, wait." He went to lay down on his bed with the full intention of calling out to the Dark Lord with his mind, but there was a hoot and Harry looked up to find Hedwig in her cage. On his bed, she had left a letter, a letter that could only be from Gabriella. He reached down, picked it up, and was about to toss it on his desk, when he caught the faint aroma of her perfume. It was as if an ocean wave crashed onto the fire burning in his blood extinguishing the flame and leaving only embers. He pulled the letter close and examined the writing as he sat down on his bed.

"Harry," Ron panted as he climbed the stairs, "Harry, you can't." He entered their dormitory, only to find Harry reading a letter by candlelight. "You, er... you've got to stay, erm..." Harry looked up at him and smiled.

"Yes?" Harry asked. Ron's eyes narrowed and he glanced to the open window. He walked over and shut it tight.

"You... You're not flying out." Ron said with determination. For an instant, Harry honestly didn't know what Ron was talking about. Gabriella's letter had taken him back to Little Whinging. It was filled with talk of his return for Christmas and mixed with a subtle sadness that Soseh was still not well. He set the letter down, took off his trainers, lay down on his bed, and began to read the letter again. He cast a glance at Ron who was still standing defiantly at the window.

"We're always getting in the way of the Order's business, Ron. I'm staying put, so you can sit back down." He turned the paper over in his hand and then whispered to himself, "At least through Christmas," he said and took in a deep whiff of air.

He lay there with the letter in his hands the rest of the night. He held it as Goyle stomped up declaring that he'd find the Death Eater sneaking onto the grounds. He held it as Dean slipped in, cast Harry a steely glance, and went to sleep in silence. He held it as Ron wearily swore he'd stay awake to watch him, only to begin snoring

seconds later. He held it knowing his other dorm-mate would not be sleeping in his bed at Hogwarts this night. He held it as he thought of Luna and wondered if now, before Voldemort himself, she felt fear. He pulled the comforter up close, rolled over on his side, and with Gabriella's letter in his hands, whispered, "I'm sorry," and fell asleep.

All was dark as the smell of wet paint filled his nostrils. He heard the sound of steps ascending the stairs, the squeaking of floorboards outside the door, and whispers. They were arguing again. "Who would be brave enough to wake him?" he thought with satisfaction. There was a pause, the doorknob rattled, and slowly the door opened.

"Damn, Wythe, he's sleeping," someone whispered.

"I know that, Pendleton, you fool," a voice hissed back. "He wanted the package to come directly to him. Wake him up."

"YOU wake him up," was the response, and Harry had to smile thinking of the cowards who would both be punished shortly. He had expressly forbidden his Death Eaters to use their names in front of others, even each other. That privilege was reserved for the Dark Lord alone. And then came an unexpected voice.

"So that's Voldemort," she said flatly. "He doesn't look like much. Somehow I figured him much... bigger. My father always said that..."

Instantly, Harry rose to his feet, wand at the ready. There, in the doorway, was Luna Lovegood bookended by two Death Eaters in dark brown cloaks. "Luna!" he called out. The two Death Eaters looked up at him frightened and bewildered. Clearly, this was a side of their Dark Lord they had never seen before. Luna stared at his eyes with a quizzical expression. Rage began to fill him from within and his scar exploded in pain.

"Leave me!" Voldemort screamed in a high, cold voice. "I'll summon you later." The three stepped backward out the door, shutting it as they departed. "They will pay!" he hissed, holding his hand to his forehead. His heart was pounding in his chest, and his breath shallow. Slowly, he began to regain his composure. "So you've come to join me, Harry," Voldemort's voice said, but his lips did not move. "It's not

polite to eavesdrop, although it was I who left open the invitation.” At once, Harry realized who he was... who he was with. His mind began to push back, but he hesitated in his desire to learn about his friends. He felt Voldemort smiling at the decision.

“Welcome, Harry, to my world. Perhaps, a bit more light. Incandessa forte!” The room grew bright, as the candles seemed to burn like torches. It was the same room Harry had seen Neville in, small and cramped with chains hanging from the walls. Only now, instead of peeling paint, the room was a freshly painted, dark green. I thought perhaps your friend might enjoy the work.” Voldemort turned and with him so did Harry. Huddled in the corner, covered in green paint, and holding a small paintbrush tightly in his right hand was Neville Longbottom. His eyes were open, but vacant, staring blankly into nothingness. Harry tried to reach out for him, but was held fast.

“He’s waiting for you, Harry,” the voice hissed in his mind. “We’re all waiting for you.” Voldemort began to laugh cruelly. “And now we have another of your co-conspirators. Tell me my young Gryffindor, how many will it take before you act.” The laughter stopped abruptly and the voice in his mind turned to pure ice. “Coward,” it hissed slowly. In that instant, Harry was consumed with a rage he’d never felt before.

“I’ll have your heart!” Harry’s mind screamed out and his forehead, Voldemort’s forehead, split open in searing pain and suddenly he found himself, found Voldemort, falling to his knees. It was unexpected and Harry could see that for an instant Voldemort was confused and angry. But then, the Dark Lord began to laugh as he stood again.

“I have no heart, Potter,” Voldemort hissed. He felt something slide across his ankle, and looked down to see Nagini coil in a great arc about the dusty floor. “Join me, Potter,” Voldemort beckoned, and Harry could feel himself being pulled in deeper. Instinctively, he pushed back, as if slapping Voldemort in the face. Instantly the scene changed. He was at the water’s edge, only this time for no reason he was fearful. Was it acid? He stepped away, only to slip and fall into the clear liquid, and screamed until the burning sensation reached his throat.

When Harry woke, he was shaking and nauseous. The dormitory was still dark and he stubbed his toe as he hurried to the bathroom and emptied what little there was in his stomach. When he finally went to wash his face, he ran into Dean coming to take an early shower.

"Dean," greeted Harry weakly with a nod of his head.

"Harry," Dean returned, as Harry went to wash his face. As Harry bent low he heard Dean whisper from behind, "Viswa Vajra."

"What?" Harry asked turning. Dean's eyes were wide, fixed on Harry's arm.

"Viswa Vajra," he whispered again, stepping closer to Harry. Without asking, he took Harry's arm holding it close and examining it as if it were a fine painting. Over the past weeks, his scar, much as Malfoy's, had been fading. But now, it was as vivid as it had ever been, red and raised on his forearm. Dean, still holding Harry's arm, looked up into his eyes. "This bit here, it's the mark on Malfoy." Harry nodded. "Except this." Dean traced his finger around the two lightening bolts that crossed at the base of the sword. "Viswa Vajra," he whispered again, letting go of Harry's arm. "I knew it was Tibetan," he smiled with satisfaction.

"You know this mark?" Harry asked.

"It's a pretty good brand, Potter," Dean complimented. "But why hide it? Did you do it this summer?" Harry was speechless. "I like that you left off the symbol of protection when you hexed Malfoy. Certainly, he'll never have a hand in destroying evil."

"It's a charm," Harry whispered looking at his own arm, and then it dawned on him. "Viswa Vajra -- a protection charm." No sooner had the words left his mouth than the mark began to disappear. He sighed, placing both hands on the sink before him, his head hung low. "Dean," he began, "you need to know that I would never..."

"Look, Harry," Dean interrupted, "I've got to get ready. Don't worry, your secret's safe with me." And before Harry could say another word,

Dean had left for the shower. Harry watched and wondered as his dorm-mate left.

At breakfast in the Great Hall, the mood was grim with only a handful of professors at the head table, the others having joined the various search parties. Still feeling a bit nauseous, Harry only poked at his food. He decided not to speak of his dream, which was fine since everyone had already jumped to the simple, and correct, conclusion that Voldemort had taken Luna. He was mad at himself for not staying long enough to discover where they were.

“Padma was going to help them with that stupid snake,” cried Parvati in tears, she could have been taken too.”

Ginny held Parvati’s hand and asked the group, “What will happen to Hogwarts?”

“It’s tough to have school if none of the professors are around,” answered Ron as he looked up at the head table from which McGonagall, Tonks and Hagrid were absent.

“Tonks is searching for Luna, tracking whoever took her,” said Hermione knowingly.

“She’s not strong enough yet,” Harry whispered back with concern. “She doesn’t have the power to...” The door off the side of the Great Hall opened and everyone’s head turned. There, with a large text in one arm was Remus Lupin. Professor Flitwick stood to greet him and escorted him to where Tonks normally sat for breakfast.

Remus looked out across the Great Hall and found Harry. He didn’t wave, but just held his gaze for an instant, then sat down for breakfast. The murmurs of confusion and foreboding continued to rumble around the room. Harry wasn’t sure what he felt. His face had smiled back at Remus, but part of Harry was distinctly irritated by the new professor’s presence. Where was Dumbledore?

“Blimey,” whispered Ron, “they decided to accept a werewolf as substitute teacher?”

"I'm sure they'll take anyone they can trust, Ron," said Hermione as she slumped back on the bench and looked around the Great Hall. "But I don't think it matters any more. The word's out -- nobody's safe, not even here. Don't you see? Hogwarts is no longer under Dumbledore's protection. If something doesn't change, they'll close the school."

Harry briskly pushed his plate forward and it disappeared to the kitchens below. Then he stood and began to walk away. Hermione grabbed his hand.

"Harry, it's not your fault," she said looking up at Harry's eyes as they burned with fire. Then she took in a deep breath. "Any more than it is mine." There was guilt in her words as she looked away, but then she stood at his side. "Leave it to the Ministry, to the Order. They'll find Neville and Luna; I'm sure they will." Harry took a step closer to Hermione so that only she could hear.

"I could have found out last night where they are, Hermione. It was at my fingertips. I just had to... to ask." His words were soft, but trembling with rage. "Last night I blinked. It won't happen next time. It won't happen ever again." He let go of Hermione's hand, and walked out through a sea of low murmurs that filled the Great Hall with despair.

"NEVER AGAIN!" he cried out with his hands clenched at his sides as he passed through the entrance to the Great Hall. The torches that floated to either side of the huge wooden doors burst bright with flame. A few students shrieked as Harry's words echoed about the room.

"Never again! Never again!"

Chapter 39 - A Loss of Self

It was late, very late, but candles flickered all about the common room. The rhythmic tick-tock of the Yorkshire oak grandfather clock was starting to lull Harry to sleep. The fire was warm and his eyes were heavy. He could not remember ever being this tired, and for a moment he considered just resting his head on his arms. But no sooner had he laid down his quill than Hermione, without saying a word, poked him in the ribs. Ron flipped open another book about Muggles and, shaking his head, let out a hapless sigh. Indeed, the room was filled with wretched faces silently reading, or scrawling on their parchments. Every so often, there would be a hushed whisper, a cough, or the occasional snore. Parvati had left an hour earlier in tears, cursing that it wasn't fair.

Two weeks had passed since Luna's abduction and despite the many student complaints, Professor McGonagall had decided the best way to keep their minds on their education was exams. Each class was to have an end-of-term test. Students in each N.E.W.T. were required to pass the test in order to proceed with the class the next term. Hermione thought it a smashing idea and had to be repeatedly reminded not to whistle while the rest of Gryffindor crammed for their upcoming exams.

Surprisingly, only a handful of parents had removed their children from Hogwarts. There had been scattered incidents of terror all about Great Britain and Western Europe, and the threat of something yet more serious made Hogwarts seem the safest place. It was clear, however, that many students were told by their parents to stay away from Harry. The general feeling was that if you got too close, you might wind up a target, and despite Harry's isolation, it was a hypothesis that he shared. He preferred that his friends stay distant and safe, but Hermione and Ron were steadfast in their support and they were constantly seen at Harry's side.

The worst of Harry's exams tomorrow, he knew, would be Potions. Professor Snape had grown increasingly agitated over Harry's newfound ability to mix the required concoctions with ease. By remaining calm and with a few secret pointers from Malfoy, Harry was performing as well or better than any student in the class. Still, he

was sure that Professor Snape would be out for blood, and Harry wasn't going to give him the opportunity. At least, that's what he thought four hours ago when he would normally be crawling into bed, laying his head to pillow and clearing his mind of all thought. Now, well past midnight, his mind was too tired to focus on much of anything

His eyelids dipped low again, and a flickering vision of Voldemort danced across the darkness. So often as he fell asleep Harry considered reaching out to Voldemort with his mind, but each time his thoughts turned to Dumbledore who, everyone knew by now, was near death. Harry would not forget his promise to the Headmaster, particularly after what happened last year. So, he redoubled his efforts at Occlumency. He and Ron worked together as Ron would try to enter his mind and Harry would push him away. Ron had achieved a much great acumen at focusing his mental attacks, occasionally finding paths around Harry's defenses. Once, Ron saw a vision of Malfoy smoking a cigarette before Harry cut him off. Ron's face furled hoping for an explanation, but Harry gave none, and staying true to their agreement before they started, Ron didn't ask. Now the redhead held the same scrunched up face as he peered into his book on Muggles. Ron slammed the book closed, popping Harry's eyes fully open.

"That's it," Ron hissed, standing and stretching to the ceiling. "I don't care what the proper process is for obtaining a valid driver's license! Can you imagine Harry, I've been driving for years and I'm not eligible for even a provisional permit until I'm... er..." Ron reached for the book again.

"Seventeen," Harry replied.

"Right! Seventeen!" he called out to Hermione hoping that she might agree that waiting such a long time was insanity. But, garnering no support, he turned back to Harry. "How'd you know that?"

"I've got mine," said Harry as he reached into his jeans, pulled out his wallet, and withdrew the plastic card. "Not a very good picture, but then I was... erm, not well." Hermione snapped it from his hands.

"Harry, that can't be real," she said indignantly, glancing down at the card with his picture. "It says you're seventeen. But you're not... you can't..." Harry took the card back and looked at his picture.

"Don't be silly," he whispered, and with a thin smile he closed his potions book. "You're right, Ron. We're as good as done. Let's go to bed."

"But you haven't even reviewed your dragon scale potions, Harry!" Hermione whispered back. The three were starting to get some glowers from about the room. "And what about Basic Aparation? You've only..."

"Good night, Hermione," Ron interrupted, and before she could say another word, both he and Harry were headed for the stairs.

When Harry finally collapsed into bed, Ron reminded him to clear his mind, and he nodded. But his mind wasn't on exams or abductions. It was turned fully to Little Whinging. Just last night Hedwig had returned with another letter from Gabriella. Harry reached his hand under his pillow and read it once again.

Harry,

The nights grow cold and seem to last forever. I can't believe only one more week and I'll see your face again. I miss you so. Mama has been filled with excitement for the holiday. Usually she breaks out in a grand smile, and in those moments I know she's with me. But lately she seems to be growing more agitated. I know it's not what I dreamed of last summer, but nothing is ever what we dream.

I saw your aunt yesterday and she said that she was well aware that you would be returning for the holiday, and would I please mind my own business. They've been loading the place up with presents, but I don't imagine any are for you. Don't worry though. I have a special present all my own -- I hope you like surprises! Have you solved the riddle yet?

I woke up this morning, and the air was silent. There was a layer of snow covering Privet Drive and it seemed to magically turn the world

into a whisper. It's my first time in the snow, at least that I remember. I don't know what I was expecting, but for a moment I forgot all my cares and dreamt of sitting here at the fire with you at my side. Maybe you can make one of my dreams come true!

Love,

Gabriella

Harry folded the paper and tucked it under his pillow. Ron was already snoring when Harry waved his hand and extinguished the candlelight. In the darkness, he held the same hand to his face and, in that instant, considered reaching out to Voldemort. But inside a voice whispered, "Don't be silly," and Harry rolled to his side, cleared his mind, and fell asleep.

When Harry and Hermione arrived for the potions exam the following day, they were both surprised to see Professor McGonagall standing at the front of the class. Snape had never missed a class in all the years Harry had been at Hogwarts. After everyone had filtered in, she raised her hands to silence the murmurs.

"Professor Snape," she said in a strong clear voice, "could not be here this morning to administer your exam. He asked that I present you with the following problem." She waived her wand at the board and there appeared a list of some twenty questions that ended in a practicum: Create a draught capable of healing severe burns.

"Oh no," Marietta muttered. "That's over ten ingredients."

"It's not so bad," consoled Cho who was sitting at her side. "Just remember to..."

"Silence!" Professor McGonagall called out. "You will answer the questions on fewer than two scrolls AND complete the concoction within the allotted two hours beginning... now." She turned a large sand-dial over and the grains began to fall, far too quickly for Harry's liking. In his mind, Marietta was right, twelve ingredients was only half the battle. Each had to be specially prepared and when they had attempted the potion in class originally, no one finished on time. Harry

glanced around the room. Malfoy was already scribbling furiously on his first sheet of parchment. Harry took a deep breath and began.

Malfoy was the first to finish, making far too much noise as he stoppered up his potion and walked forward presenting it to Professor McGonagall. Hermione was a close second. They both began to leave when Professor McGonagall stopped them.

"Please remain quietly in your seats until everyone is dismissed," she whispered. Hermione nodded, but Malfoy groaned.

"But Professor," he whined, "I've finished the bloody potion. What more could there possibly be?"

"Please return to your seat, Mr. Malfoy," replied Professor McGonagall. Her voice was tight and her eyes cool. Harry had never quite seen her like this, except perhaps, last year with Professor Umbridge. An inexplicable sense of dread began to fill him from the inside as he carefully crushed the last ingredient. He needed ten minutes to brew the potion and he only had about twelve left. Quickly, but carefully he began to add the ingredients in his cauldron, slowly stirring one way and then the other. A few more students stepped forward with their work, including Cho and Marietta. A bead of sweat dropped down the side of Harry's face. His hands were wet and as he reached for a bottle to fill with his potion, the glass slipped from his hands and shattered to the floor. With his wand he reassembled it, filled it, placed the cork and handed it to Professor McGonagall with about ten grains of sand to spare.

There were three students still working when Professor McGonagall called time, and one of them was Anthony Goldstein.

"I'll take your parchments now," Professor McGonagall said to those still working, "but leave your potions where they are."

"But why?" Anthony called out. "It's nearly done. I should get partial credit."

“According to Professor Snape, who left strict instructions, credit is only given to fully successful potions and what you have there will be utterly useless.”

“Successful?” Hermione choked. Professor McGonagall’s face turned sour and lost a bit of colour, but she seemed resolute.

“Each of you will receive a burn on your forearm. After which you will take the potion to determine its success.”

“But...” started Cho.

“If your potion fails, I have prepared my own here.” Professor McGonagall turned to a dozen potion bottles at the desk behind her.

“She’s not expecting much success, is she?” Harry whispered in Hermione’s ear. She just shook her head.

“He’s vicious is what he is,” she replied through gritted teeth. Malfoy stepped forward and bared his right forearm.

“I’ll be happy to go first, Professor,” he said with an air of smugness. Professor McGonagall simply shook her head.

“Very well,” she whispered. She reached for his right arm, but he pulled it away offering up his left. Holding the arm in her hand, she pointed her wand directly at the soft portion of his forearm. “Incendio!” she spoke softly. A small blast of flame erupted from the tip of her wand and Malfoy jerked away. Grinding his teeth, he refused to scream as he grabbed his potion and swallowed in one gulp. Instantly, the charred blisters began to fade and in only a few seconds, his arm was perfectly healed.

“Very good, Mr. Malfoy,” Professor McGonagall congratulated. “You may go.”

“Oh no, Professor,” he smirked, “I have to watch this.” And he sat up on one of the desks to get a clearer view of the practical exam. By the time Harry’s turn came, some eight students had failed. Besides Malfoy, only Cho and Hermione were successful at removing the burn

from their arms. Hermione had squealed in pain, but Cho simply grimaced. When Marietta's potion failed, she began to scream in panic. It took some moments before she came to her senses and took the potion from McGonagall.

As Harry stepped forward, a sudden panic overcame him. "Dragon scales," he thought suddenly to himself. "I forgot the dragon scales." His heart began to race as Professor McGonagall also reached for Harry's right arm, but he too turned and presented his left. "I've failed the N.E.W.T.," he whispered out loud. His future began to play in his mind and he imagined Snape smirking over him at the beginning of next semester and telling him to leave his class. All hope of becoming an Auror came crashing down.

Professor McGonagall slid his robe back exposing the arm, but no sooner had she raised her wand than his right arm began to prickle. When she cast the spell, instead of grabbing for his left arm like so many had done before, he buckled to his knees holding his right. On the floor, he simply dropped his head and cursed. "How could I have been so stupid?"

"Look at him squirm," Malfoy drawled.

"Take your potion, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said handing him his vial. Knowing it would fail, he popped the liquid down his throat and took to his feet. He began to walk to the desk to get one of Professor McGonagall's potions, when her words stopped him in his tracks.

"Very good, Mr. Potter," she said. "That healed far faster than any of the others. You may leave if you so wish." Harry looked down at his left arm. The flesh was un blistered, not even red. With his left hand, he reached under his robe to his right forearm, which was, as he expected, raised with the scar he knew too well.

"A protection charm," he thought. Not wanting to watch any other students suffer, he turned to get his things only to find Malfoy sitting upon his desk. Harry slipped his cauldron and other tools into his bag, and was starting to leave when Malfoy noticed that on a strip of paper at his side were four precisely cut dragon scales.

"Hey Potter, wait up," he called and followed him out of the classroom. "Missing something?" Malfoy held up the paper with the scales on it. "I don't suppose you cut these up as extras, considering we were so pressed for time. So that means you didn't use them, and yet, your potion worked. Tell me, how is it that..." Harry stopped short in the hallway, stepped close to Malfoy, and held his right arm out to show him the scar.

"I told you," Harry said. "It comes and it goes. Somehow it healed the burn on my other arm." Malfoy began to smirk with a knowing expression.

"Then, Harry," he said stepping closer, "you've given me a very special gift." He paused for a moment. "I added the drendle wings before the cypress leaves. My potion shouldn't have worked either." He placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "A special gift... and if I'm not mistaken, I believe it's been growing stronger," he drawled, and then strode ahead on up the stone steps and out of sight. No sooner had he disappeared than Hermione was at Harry's side.

"That was just dreadful," she whispered sliding a parchment into her pack.

"He's never missed a class, Hermione, never. We haven't seen Tonks in two weeks and now Snape's missing." Hermione simply shook her head.

"If Professor Sinistra says Tonks is okay, then..."

"Would you stop that?" Harry snapped back. "When will you realize that they're lying, you're ALL lying!" They stopped in the hall and Harry stepped close. "Don't deny it, Hermione," he hissed through gritted teeth, anger gurgling throughout his insides. "You're in on it up to your neck. Both you and Ron, I'm sure, are having a grand old time!"

"Ron doesn't know," Hermione said quietly, looking down.

"What?" Harry asked taken aback. Hermione looked at him and her eyes moistened.

"I said he doesn't know, Harry. He can't know." Her words seemed to have no effect. Harry just stared at her blankly. She blinked and wiped her face with the cuff of her robe.

He stood there for a long time wondering what, exactly, she was getting at. For two weeks a question had been gnawing at his insides. For two weeks, they had studied side-by-side and Harry couldn't help but wonder if maybe.... "Surely Ron would see... would know," he told himself, but that wasn't enough. Now, hearing her words... he could bear it no longer.

"Hermione," he asked, "where were you when Luna disappeared?" An innocent question, but he knew she'd take it for how he meant it. There was no way around that. Instantly, her own face flushed with anger. She stepped toward him and her eyes, now clear and defiant, blazed with such fury he almost reached for his wand.

"How dare you!" she yelled stabbing him in the chest with her finger. The pain jolted him backwards into the wall. "Everyone turns their back on you, while Ron and I have spent every minute of every day watching yours. Six years of risking my neck to keep yours safe and you think..." She groaned and turned to leave, but Harry grabbed her cloak.

"Keep me safe?" he yelled back. "I don't need you, or anybody else to keep me safe! I didn't see you when I was facing Voldemort in the dungeons. I didn't see you there when I was bitten by the Basilisk!" He was advancing on her now. She'd seen him angry before, but never like this. "Where were you while I was dueling Voldemort? Where were you when he tried to possess me?" Hermione took another step back. "You can keep your bloody neck safe and sound. You and Ron and... and... whoever, can keep your secrets. I don't need your help, or anyone else's." This time it was Harry who started to storm off. "Draco was right!" were the last, unsettling words she heard.

That night, Harry skipped dinner choosing instead to wander aimlessly about the great castle. It was getting late, he was tired, and he was beginning to regret his words to Hermione. Convincing himself he would apologize, he started for the common room, but half way there it suddenly became the last place he wanted to be. He needed to be with friends and tonight Gryffindor tower was not it. Knowing he'd be scolded, and without his cloak, he plunged into the frigid night air to visit Hagrid. The latest storm had laid down half a foot a fresh snow, and as he crunched through the powder he left behind the only visible set of tracks leading the way to Hagrid's cabin. Smoke billowed from the chimney and the candlelight flickering inside brought hope that Hagrid would still be within. He'd visited twice before during the school year, only to find the cabin empty. When he knocked this time, again there was no answer. Nothing stirred save the rumbling snores of Hagrid's dog Fang.

Harry went around to peek in through the windows, but the frost had made that impossible. Undaunted, he decided to try the back door. The night was cold and still, and the muffled sound of his footsteps brought up a faint memory, familiar and distant, that he couldn't quite place. Once at the back door, he pounded again, and again there was no answer. He sighed and turned to leave when he noticed the snow. Leaving the back entrance of Hagrid's cabin were two sets of footprints that extended some twenty feet, only to disappear into the darkness. One set was clearly Hagrid's, the other set were those of a horse. "F-Firenze?" Harry whispered as his teeth began to chatter.

Knowing he shouldn't be out and knowing that two students had already been taken from the school grounds, Harry pulled out his wand. He glanced toward the castle which was brightly lit and glittering with ice-crystals and then he peered into the darkness that turned toward the Forbidden Forest. "Just go back," he whispered to himself shivering, only to find his steps leading toward the darkness. Half way to the forest, it was growing increasingly difficult to follow the tracks. "Lumos," he whispered and his wand gave off a gentle glow. Ten yards into the forest, however, the tracks disappeared. Harry searched everywhere, but could find nothing. Still, something was drawing him further into the trees. He peered into the darkness, but his senses began to take hold and he chose, hesitantly, to return to

the warmth of school. After only three paces, a voice stopped him in his own tracks.

“Harry Potter! What are yeh doin’ out this time o’ night? If professor Dumbledore knew you was sneakin’ about, he’d have yer hide!” Harry turned to see Hagrid striding toward him out of the darkness, the giant’s footsteps crunching across the snow. Looking at Hagrid, Harry smiled, but no smile was returned. The half-giant grabbed him by the arm and lifted him from the ground. “Come with me,” he said sternly. Hanging in midair Harry watched as the darkness faded behind them and the lights of the castle grew nearer. But to Harry’s relief, they weren’t headed to the castle, they were headed to Hagrid’s cabin.

“This’ll do fer now,” Hagrid grumbled. Still holding Harry suspended in the air, he lifted the heavy iron latch on his back door and threw it open. Fang quickly greeted him and began to jump up as if Harry was some sort of morsel or doggie snack. “Down with yeh, dog!” Hagrid snapped. Harry had never seen Hagrid show any sign of temper, except when he was being blasted with stunners last year, and he was feeling a bit frightened. Hagrid dropped him in the large leather chair by the fire. “Sit there, while I think a bit.” Clearly agitated, he went over and put on a pot for tea. “Do yeh know what might a happened out there? Do yeh know how late it is?” He reached up into the cupboard for some tea and absentmindedly tossed down a golden ring onto the large wooden table near the stove. Unusual, Harry thought, for Hagrid to carry such a precious object. It was a fairly thin ring, about a galleon in size, and for a moment Harry wondered if it might be a wedding ring.

“That’s not a...” Harry began, but Hagrid cut him off.

“I’ll be askin’ the questions tonight Harry,” he said more calmly. “Tell me, what did yeh see?”

“Nothing, really,” Harry replied.

“I know you better than that, Harry Potter,” Hagrid answered, taking the kettle and pouring Harry a cup of tea. “Start with when yeh left the castle and tell me what yeh saw.” He walked over and grabbed a

large bowl filled with biscuits. Harry was hungry enough to give one a try even if it did require a good soaking first.

“Well, I only saw tracks to the forest. Yours and... Firenze, I guess. He’s been spending a lot of time over here at night.”

“An’ what else?” Hagrid asked again.

“Well... the wedding ring,” Harry added. Hagrid just looked confused. “There, on the table,” Harry pointed. Hagrid saw the golden band and quickly snapped it back into his hands.

“Yeh shoul’n’t a seen tha’,” he grimaced. “Is that all?”

“Why? What’s going on? What are you and Firenze...”

“Finish yer tea, Harry, an’ I’ll walk yeh back to the castle.”

Harry took another sip and snapped off a bit of biscuit. Good and wet, they didn’t taste half bad. He wanted to press the questions, but Hagrid was clearly on guard. So, after a while, he and Hagrid began talking about other things. Somewhere in the conversation, Harry’s mind turned to Quidditch and he began to describe the last match.

“I didn’t care much about the money,” Harry said. “But it’s always better to win,” he said with a smile and Hagrid laughed. “Draco played well, that’s for sure.”

“Draco?” Hagrid asked with a tinge of irritation in his voice. “Yeh mean, Malfoy?” Harry knew at once he’d misspoke. He’d done the same during the match in front of Ron. He simply nodded, stuffing a chunk of biscuit in his mouth.

“I’ve seen yeh practicing on the pitch with tha’ new broom ‘o yours,” Hagrid interjected. “You’ve mastered the Caduceus better than Malfoy, any day.”

“It flies something wonderful,” said Harry brightly. “I know you won’t like this, but I took Cho on it over the Forest... all the way to the falls.”

"You what?" Hagrid asked raising his voice. "Do yeh know what'd happed to yeh if you'd a fallin' off?" Harry just stayed quiet. He was hoping that, at least with Hagrid, he could just relax, but he was starting to get tense again, almost irritated. And then Hagrid said something unexpected. "Eh...what falls?"

"The great waterfall, pretty much in the center of the forest I figure," he replied expecting Hagrid to know the spot, but the half-giant simply shook his head.

"There ain't no waterfall in the Forbidden Forest, Harry."

"Hagrid, I saw it," said Harry. "The falls fell at least fifty feet through a crevice fed by a stream that wound its way out of the forest. There were a bunch of little pools, all over." Hearing his own words, Harry paused. There was something gnawing at him, but before he could put his finger on it Hagrid answered back.

"Harry, I've been through every inch of the Forbidden Forest and there's no falls."

"Every inch?" Harry quizzed.

"Well, I haven't been to the village of the Centaurs... Terntalag-... ah, you'll have teh ask Firenze what they call it. They'll only let Dumbledore visit there, but he's never mentioned any falls and the village isn't near the forest's heart." Then Hagrid uncharacteristically shuddered. "That's as dark and cold as any place on earth."

Harry finished with his tea and it was getting late. Still, the thought of returning to the Gryffindor common room was daunting. He looked at the frost covered window and then to the back door. "Where is Firenze, anyway?" he asked. Hagrid rose and grabbed a blanket.

"Here, put this on," he said, ignoring Harry's question. "I'll walk yeh back to the castle."

Hagrid escorted Harry to the castle doors, then took his blanket back. "Don't worry 'bout Firenze and me, Harry. We're just makin' sure there's a backup plan, is all."

"Backup plan?" Harry asked. "Backup plan for what?" Hagrid simply smiled and patted Harry on the head.

"Get some sleep, lad," he said gently. "You'll need your energy tomorrow for your tests." Harry furrowed his brow and then remembered. His Care of Magical Creatures and Defense Against the Dark Arts exams were tomorrow morning and he'd just spent the whole evening on everything but studying.

Quickly, he said goodnight to Hagrid and ran toward Gryffindor tower. There were only a handful of students out this late, most making their way back from the library. Harry ran by one student that grabbed him by his arm and spun him around. It was Seamus Finnigan.

"Hey Harry," he said with a smile, as the fingers in Harry's right arm began to prickle, "what's the rush?"

"Oh... hi, Seamus," Harry answered looking to Seamus and then back in the direction he wanted to head. Harry was in a hurry to do what little studying he could, and his expression made it clear that he wasn't interested in conversation. What right did Seamus have to grab his arm, anyway? Seamus had been more-or-less sequestered with the Ravenclaws for the whole term and now a chance to say a simple hello to his old dorm-mate was being thrown back in his face. He could see the irritation building on Harry's face, and became angry.

"What?" Seamus spat. "Yeh too busy fer yer old dorm-mate? Out a sight, out a mind, eh? Yeh do know I'll be comin' back in a few weeks, although I don't know why I'd want to." Harry wasn't much listening, nor was he thinking; the prickling sensation was working its way up his arm. What right did Seamus have to use that tone of voice? Harry's eyes blinked. He needed to go; he didn't have time for banter.

"Yeah, er, I think Goyle put in a request to stay with Gryffindor. Maybe you could ask to stay with Ravenclaw." Harry patted Seamus on the shoulder. In fact, stay with Ravenclaw. I don't care. Harry turned to walk away. "Really, Seamus, I need to go." Harry began to run down the corridor.

He'd only taken a few strides when he heard Seamus curse something at his back and his arm burst with pain. Bending to another will not all his own, Harry dropped to one knee as a bolt of red light flashed over his head. Normally, he would turn to defend himself and perhaps expel the wand from Seamus' hand, but not this time. This time Harry found himself suddenly consumed with rage. He turned and saw Seamus bearing down on him, wand drawn, and face flush. He was going to cast again, Harry knew that, and he would stop it; he would stop it forever. Harry pulled his wand and a stream of white light instantly struck Seamus in the chest. There was no incantation, only a thought, a thought of hatred toward this enemy, this old enemy. He continued to hold his wand straight at Seamus and the beam of white began to spread around his chest like an electric spider web. Seamus dropped his wand and grabbed for his chest. Harry's eyes were fixed, he saw no friend, only an attacker... an old nemesis that would pay. Seamus began gasping for air.

"H-Harry... stop," he pleaded breathlessly. "I c-can't b-br..." But Harry heard nothing but the unwanted pleas of his enemy hissing his last breath. He stepped closer and the web of light encircled Seamus' chest. Then, from somewhere distant, he heard another voice. It was familiar and growing louder.

"Harry! STOP!" He turned to see Hermione, staring at him with a horrified expression. "STOP! YOU'RE KILLING HIM!" He blinked and the rage ebbed away. His fog of a vision cleared before him, and he saw his friend Seamus twisted in the energy still erupting from his wand. The instant he realized what he was doing, Harry ceased the spell, and Seamus fell to the ground, lifeless. Hermione ran to his side, pulled her wand and a sparkling green light seemed to stream down onto Seamus' face. Instantly, he gasped for air and opened his eyes. Harry started to walk forward to the two on the ground.

"I... I'm sorry," he whispered with a dazed expression. His emotions were sloshing all over the insides of his brain. "I thought he was... I didn't mean to..." he began. "Here, let me help," he offered, but Seamus slid back, away from Harry's advance. "No, Seamus... I swear, I would never..."

“Harry,” Hermione cut in crossly, “get out of here. He’s afraid of you, and I can’t say that I blame him. I’ll get him to the hospital wing.” Harry just stared, dumbfounded.

“Really, Hermione,” Harry offered again. “Let me...” he reached and Seamus recoiled again.

“I said, go!” she yelled.

Finally, it sunk in. He nodded and turned toward the common room. The handful of students who had seen what happened parted in fear to let him pass as he walked down the corridor. The thought of Draco Malfoy crawled into his mind and a cold shiver shot down his spine. What was happening to him? What was he becoming? In that moment, he knew what he must do. Hermione was right; he was a threat to anything and anyone who got too close. It was time for him to go... to leave Hogwarts forever.

Chapter 40 - The Marauder's Eye

Hours slipped by as Harry aimlessly wandered the halls of Hogwarts, ever alert to avoid Peeves, Mr. Filch, and his cat, Mrs. Norris. His mind floated between fear over what was happening to him, guilt over what he'd done to his friends, and anger over what his friends had done to him. He had nearly killed Seamus and, not knowing why, he was still shaking--an echo of the rage he felt when his mind was turned to destruction. If he were to see Mrs. Norris right now, her dust coloured fur would likely become just that--dust.

Since Neville and Luna's disappearance, students were already avoiding him as if he were once again the heir of Slytherin. How much more isolated would he be, if they thought him capable of murdering his own housemate? And his friends... his friends were up to something. Hermione said that Ron didn't know, but Harry was sure the two of them were both working for the Order behind his back. That must be it; otherwise why were they always stopping their conversation when he would come to join them? Why would they suddenly part from each other when he walked into the room? They were planning something together, completely unwilling to let him know. What was it? He went to slug the wall, but stopped himself short. Still, the stone popped and a puff of dust covered his hand. Harry clenched his fist tighter, shaking it in front of his face. Every emotion imaginable was surging through his body, and with each passing moment the need to get back to Gabriella and ensure her safety grew stronger and stronger.

Slowly, he convinced himself that it was utterly pointless to remain at Hogwarts. He had no hope of uniting the houses, even with Malfoy's help -- an alliance with a snake that was more likely to strike with fangs as coil in friendship. Once, passing by the circular staircase to the Headmaster's office, he considered using the password that Professor Dumbledore had given him. But, the fear of what he would find there turned him away. The Headmaster was now struggling for his life because he chose to expend his magical energy to save Harry; the young wizard's mind played the film of his spirit being captured by the green flame. No, there was nothing left for Harry here, and everything waiting for him on Privet Drive. It was so perfectly obvious when he fully committed himself to leave Hogwarts forever.

It was well past curfew when he hastily began to outline his strategy to return home to the girl he loved. His first step would be to run for Hogsmeade. From there, he would take the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley, and from there... well he'd figure it out along the way. Harry quickly made his way to the entrance hall, and slipped through the front doors of the castle. Instantly, he realized his mistake. It was snowing once again. The small flakes gently drifted to the ground, and though there was no wind it was bitterly cold. He had no cloak or covering of any kind, but the very thought of stopping now to return to Gryffindor Tower was anathema. He could get his things later, but trying to escape Hogwarts and make his way back to Little Whinging in this cold with not but a wand was insanity. Remembering back to the Tri-Wizard tournament, he quickly ran to the bottom of the steps and held out his hand; he would fly.

"Accio C-Caduceus!" he called out shivering. On his broom he would stay warm. On his broom he would quickly return to her. Thoughts of Gabriella swept into his mind, and the sudden exhilaration that he would soon be leaving quickened his pulse. Shaking miserably in the cold, he scanned the skyline searching for his broom. He saw nothing, so reached for his wand to call for it once again. As he slipped the wand out, an object caught his eye from the north -- a darkness was approaching fast. "F-Finally," he whispered through chattering teeth. Staring through the snow, however, he realized that the object heading his way was too big for a broom. Indeed, as it sped closer, the outline of a man-sized figure became visible. He turned facing the attacker and, hand shaking, held his wand high as the dark outline bore down on him. Harry was ready to cast a spell when, about ten feet in front of him, the broom stopped short and through the snow the figure came into view.

"Well, that's twice I've had your wand in my face. It's starting to get a bit annoying really." In a heavy black cloak untouched by the falling snow because he was flying on Harry's Caduceus sat Remus Lupin. "You know, Harry, if I had enough galleons, I think this would be my next major purchase." Remus patted the broom's shaft. "That, or a nice set of robes. Maybe you'd give me a turn to fly her on my own sometime."

Harry furled his eyes looking for someone else. He scanned the skyline for a hint that this was some sort of ambush, but only the sprinkling snow could be seen, and only the sound of Harry's teeth and Lupin's voice could be heard.

"Your father, of course, was the famous Chaser of Gryffindor, but I wasn't half bad on a broom... for a werewolf." Remus swung his left leg off the broom and landed both feet into the soft snow. Still holding tight to the broom with his hand, he waited.

Harry, at first, was relieved. His mind had any number of horrible creatures plummeting toward him out of the darkness, but for some reason he continued to hold his wand up high. Still, Remus continued to smile completely unconcerned about his clearly disadvantaged position.

"But, how?" Harry asked. "There's no way..."

"Oh, I think there is, Harry," said Remus, stepping ever so slightly closer. "Seamus has been in hospital for hours now, and when you didn't show up in the common room, I figured you'd try to run."

"I didn't do it on purpose!" Harry snapped. "He shot at me first!"

"Hold on, Harry. Take a breath," said Remus calmly. "Nobody's saying you did anything wrong. Well, not too wrong. Seamus is going to be fine. Try to relax."

"Then w-why are you here?" asked Harry, suddenly realizing he was frightfully cold.

"Like I said, I figured you'd bolt, and the best way for you to do that is right here in my hand."

"Excellent j-job, Sh-Sherlock!" Harry stammered, slipping his wand back into his sleeve. "N-Now, let me have my b-broom, and I'll be on my way!" This time, Harry took a step forward. In less time than a blink, Remus effortlessly slipped out his wand and held it on Harry.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Harry," he said, continuing to maintain an affable smile. "Sorry for this," he nodded at his wand, "but I can't have you waving your hand at me and knocking me away, now, can I?" Harry's eyes narrowed, and a sense of rage began to build inside once again. "Yes, that's exactly the look, Harry," said Remus, the smile flickering from his face, "and that look doesn't belong to you. It's Voldemort's I believe and I thought we might have a go and try to remove it." Harry was confused, and angry, but he wasn't yet foolish enough to raise a finger let alone a wand, not on Remus.

"You're c-crazy!" Harry cried. "Voldemort has n-nothing to do with this! Now LET GO!" Harry stepped closer, reaching for his broom, and in the same instant Remus flicked his wand. Instantly, Harry's feet froze into place as if they were stuck to the ground with glue.

"Sorry about that," Remus said calmly. "You do look cold, Harry, and your broom here is keeping me quite warm with just my touch. I'll tell you what, let's make a deal. If you promise no funny business, you can touch your broom and we can talk out here, or we can go back into the castle."

Harry hesitated. There was no way he'd return to the castle. "Wait for an opportunity," he thought to himself, and he nodded his head in agreement. "I p-promise," he stammered. Remus stepped closer and let Harry take hold of the broom's tip. Immediately, Harry was filled with warmth and the droplets of ice on his glasses began to melt. "Thanks," he whispered reluctantly.

"Sorry, no hot chocolate, but I have something better," Remus began to grin again. "I've been looking for you all day, Harry. There's someone who wants to talk to you, but I'm not sure that, in the state you're in, you can be civil." Harry glanced around the bottom of the steps. He still couldn't move his feet and an uneasy feeling began to gurgle within his stomach. He glanced once again to the sky. Remus had just mentioned Voldemort, and the thought brought Harry's hand close to his wand.

"Harry," Remus chided, "please, put your hand down." Unwillingly, Harry obliged. "You're in no danger, Harry, but I do need to know you're in the right frame of mind. Just take a moment and clear your

thoughts.” Remus’ voice was calm and even, and Harry’s pulse began to slow. If someone, or something were trying to penetrate his mind, Remus was right, Occlumency would wipe it clean. But to do that, Harry would have to clear his mind of the here and now. He would forget the moment, exposing himself completely to attack.

“How do I know you’re Remus?” he asked.

“Because I know about the scar on your forearm. I know what you saw above the pitch as Dumbledore spent himself to bring your life-force back. I know... I know that if I were to drop my wand right now, you’d take this broom and fly home to Gabriella.”

Hearing her name, Harry smiled and a warmth swept away the chill in his bones. And then, without saying another word, he closed his eyes and let each thought drift away. The argument with Hermione, the fight with Seamus, the thought of Dumbledore dying in his study, the fear of Remus standing before him, everything slipped from his mind into nothingness. His eyes still closed, he heard Remus’ voice as if in a distant dream. “Okay, you can show yourself.”

Slowly, Harry opened his eyes, and awoke anew -- the fear, guilt and anger had washed away. Then he saw, sitting sidesaddle on the Caduceus, a familiar face -- Dobby. His eyes were wide and worried, glancing from side-to-side, searching to see if someone or something might be coming through the whiteness of the snow.

“Dobby!” cried Harry with a sudden burst of joy. He tried to take a step and realized, too late, his feet wouldn’t move and toppled over. Releasing the broom, a cold blast of air sent shivers down his spine. He dusted off the snow and tried to stand. When he couldn’t, Remus released the spell without saying a word, but still kept his wand at the ready. Harry stood, took the broom’s tip, and the warmth returned.

“Harry Potter, sir,” Dobby said eagerly bowing on the broom as best he could. “It is good to see the great Harry Potter still... alive.” The house elf’s face was sallow and his body thin, perhaps not worse than when Harry had seen him last, but certainly no better. On his right arm was a filthy wrap -- a bandage of some sort. Again, Dobby bent his head low. “Dobby has failed, sir.”

“Remus, we need to get him inside,” Harry pleaded with concern. “He needs...”

“He needs to talk to you, Harry,” Remus cut in, “and you need to listen.” As Dobby had done, Remus glanced into the falling snow where visibility was only a few feet. “But you’re right; this is no place for discussion. We need shelter, and I think I know just the place.” Remus threw his leg over the broom. “Jump on, then.” Harry hesitated. “No, Harry, I won’t take you back; I promise.”

Finally, Harry mounted the broom behind Remus and the three were flying toward the castle tower. Harry remembered meeting Ron’s brother, Charlie, at the tower top, handing him Norbert, Hagrid’s pet dragon. But the three didn’t fly to the castle top. Instead, they stopped against the tower’s wall some fifteen feet down from the top. There were no windows, only stone. Remus glared intently through the snow. Before Harry could ask what he was doing, Remus called out.

“There it is!” he said excitedly.

Remus pointed at a small red stone, no larger than a galleon, hidden among the large, gray, rough hewn block of the castle walls. He pulled his wand and whispered. “It’s well past midnight, we swear it’s true. Open up and let us through.” The red stone began to grow larger, as were the large rocks surrounding it. The castle was becoming enormous! Then, Harry realized that the stones weren’t growing... they were shrinking. Soon a large, red cavern was before them.

“You might want to close your eyes for this,” suggested Remus with a grin. The broom plunged forward and it felt as if they were passing through the center of a large watermelon. There was a tearing, slurping sensation, and they emerged on the other side into a large circular room. Pillows in Gryffindor colors scattered the floor interspersed with dusty glass bottles that Harry was sure were meant to hold something stronger than butterbeer. On the walls hung old posters of Quidditch teams. There were four chairs facing a large open area. Against the wall was a desk strewn with parchment and to

the far side two cots, one bare and the other covered with a torn red and gold comforter.

The three dismounted the broom. For a moment Harry gawked as Remus set the broom to the side of what now looked like a large red curtain. Instinctively, Dobby began picking up the pillows and vanishing the empty bottles.

"Where are we?" Harry asked. Remus smiled looking around the room.

"1977," he breathed, "in the Marauder's Eye. We'd sneak up here after midnight to watch replays of Monday's Quidditch matches. From here we watched the Cannons lose to the Magpies, the Kestrels lose to... well, everybody. Pettigrew was the Cannons fan."

"Don't tell Ron," said Harry sourly, looking at an old poster of the Broadmoor brothers flying for the Falcons. "Now I know why Scabbers always sat in Ron's lap when he'd read about the Cannons."

Remus walked over to the four chairs and tapped his wand on a short black pillar. In the open area, appeared an exact replica of a Quidditch match. The Tornados were playing the Wanderers. Harry had never seen anything quite like this before. It was as if they were actually sitting in the stands. One of the Tornado Chasers scored and the entire room exploded with cheers rumbling the very floor.

"That game was last week," Harry gawked. Remus tapped the pillar again. A different match appeared: Terrence Tellman was flying for the Montrose Magpies. "That was today!" Harry exclaimed. Tellman spun his broom in a loop that Harry had never seen before. "Damn, he's brilliant," admired Harry.

"You can watch the games live too, but they're usually over by this time of night." Remus looked at Dobby who was now straightening the papers on the desk. "Dobby, please stop and rest. We have much to talk about." Remus tapped the pillar and the figures disappeared. Harry turned to get Dobby when a photo in a gold frame caught his eye. A young woman with brilliant green eyes and wearing red robes

smiled back. Behind her were two kids with scruffy hair that Harry remembered seeing from his visit into Snape's memory. He picked the photograph from off the desk and stared not saying a word. Slowly, still holding the frame, he sat down upon one of the pillows lying on the floor. Remus sat down beside him.

"Merlin, we were young," Remus whispered. "Peter took this picture on one of our Hogsmeade outings. It was the first time Lilly said "Yes" to James, and he was beside himself on what to do. You'll never find another picture of him wearing a tie." The two wizards laughed. "It was the only time I ever saw James nervous about anything, except when you were born." Remus smiled broadly and ruffled Harry's hair. "But that's another story," he said with a grin. "Dobby, it's time you tell Harry what you told me." The house elf turned the stack of papers so that its edge aligned perfectly with the edge of the desk. When he turned to look at Harry and Remus side-by-side on the floor, his eyes were full of apprehension. Slowly, he approached Harry, not looking at him, but around him. Then, he stopped and bowed low.

"Dobby has failed, Harry Potter, sir," he spoke in a high, soft voice. "There is no cure." Dobby reached out his hand and held it just off of Harry's shoulder and then he shuddered. "Yes, Professor Lupin, sir, it has grown stronger."

"I don't understand," Harry said, exasperated. "You look at me like I'm going to die. It's a protection charm. How can that be bad?" Dobby looked up as if to speak, but then burst out crying, grabbing a pillow and blowing his nose.

"Yes, Harry," Remus said in a level voice, "it is a protection charm, but there are two things at work here. First, the charm was not meant for you; from what Dobby has told me, it was meant for a Muggle."

"But why would wizards cast protection charms on Muggles?" Harry asked.

"Not for the altruistic reasons you might think, Harry," Remus sighed. "During the Middle Ages, many of the kings of the time were wizards, or had wizards as their councilors. When they would go into battle, the wizard would place a charm on his troops hoping that they might

live to fight another day. Countless soldiers of the Ottoman Empire were given the charm and plunged into battle believing they were invincible. More often than not, they lost their lives in attempts at misguided valor. Their Wizengamot at the time decided that such spells violated their code of ethics and banned the charms in the early thirteenth century. Other Wizengamots around the world soon adopted similar restrictions. Of course, the use of such spells went underground, often being placed on Muggle assassins by various dark wizards through the ages. They were also used on Muggle bodyguards to act as a first, expendable, line of defense to protect valuables or family members.” Still seated at Harry’s side, Remus paused, considering his words carefully.

“Harry, on wizards or witches these dark charms don’t work properly. They become confused about what they want to protect, about what is valuable to them, and soon see threats everywhere. Often, they cause the wizard to believe that all living things are adversaries... attackers that must be slain. Inappropriately charmed wizards were known to turn on their own troops in battle, slaughtering thousands.”

“Seamus,” Harry whispered.

“It’s possible that last year Voldemort placed the charm on you hoping that you would turn on your own friends at Hogwarts, or perhaps even Professor Dumbledore. Which brings me to the second bit of magic at play: the charm is getting stronger. I believe it grows so with each visit you have with Voldemort. Until now, your own positive energy has fought off its effects, but the darkness of Voldemort’s soul is somehow seeping in and making you more vulnerable. He knows this Harry... he must.” Remus tried to speak with confidence, but his words were mixed with uncertainty, an uncertainty that did not pass Harry’s notice. Harry turned his wrist over and examined the soft skin of his forearm. His pulse began to quicken and he shook his head. Somehow, this didn’t make sense. He stood and backed away from Remus and Dobby.

“So you think I’m mad and going to kill everybody at Hogwarts?” said Harry growing angry again. “Is that it? Well? IS IT? It’s... it’s not me that’s mad, Remus. You are!” Remus stood shaking his own head.

"Harry, you don't understand," he said calmly, walking closer to Harry.

"Stay away from me!" Harry shouted, holding up his hand. A faint blue light shot from his palm and struck Remus in the chest, knocking him to the ground.

"Stop, Harry Potter, sir! Stop!" Dobby cried out. "You mustn't harm your friends!" Remus rose to one knee and took in a deep breath.

"Harry," he breathed again, "your new powers, they might be part of it. I don't know, but we need to find out. We need to see if we can have it removed." At his words Dobby looked away and Harry caught the glance. His eyes narrowed.

"You can't! Dobby already said there's no cure. You can't remove the charm, can you Remus?"

"We have to try, Harry. Before... before we lose you." At these words Harry began to tremble again. He had been ready to die, but not like this, not mad... locked up in St. Mungo's with Gilderoy Lockhart. Still holding his hand toward Remus, Harry turned to the house elf.

"Dobby, who did this to me!" Harry yelled, but the house elf simply dropped his head and sighed. "DOBBY!"

"Dobby has been many places," the house elf began with a weak and dejected voice. "Dobby has spoken to many friends and many enemies," he said, glancing down at the bandage on his right arm. "All who heard of the great Harry Potter spoke freely." Dobby walked toward Harry, again looking all about the young wizard as if examining something just inches from his skin. Holding out his hand he narrowed his eyes. "Dobby was right, Harry Potter, sir. This charm is a dark charm and it is from far away. Dobby listens and now Dobby knows. The great dark lord Pravus taught it from his castle west of the Caspian Sea centuries ago. Those who followed the ways of Pravus were killed in the Great Purge, the same time the Great Wizard Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald. The handful of remaining survivors are scattered across the globe. Dobby has failed Harry Potter. All Dobby knows is that no wand can cast the spell. The wizard must be touched to make the mark."

"That information might be enough to help us remove it, Dobby," Remus declared excitedly, but then his face fell, "if Dumbledore were well."

"I won't be sent to the mental ward!" Harry yelled. "I'm going home! Accio Caduceus!" The broom flew into Harry's hand. "I'm going... home," he whispered.

"Are you really that selfish, Harry?" Remus said flatly, but Harry ignored him and mounted his broom. "I thought you loved her." At these words Harry stopped and glared at Remus. "You nearly killed Seamus tonight, Harry. What happens when she grabs your arm and you're not suspecting it? What happens if she laughingly surprises you around a corner? Seamus lived because he's a wizard, Harry. A Muggle girl wouldn't have a chance." Harry began to breathe rapidly, glancing at the red curtain leading to escape. When he reached up and adjusted his glasses, Remus seemed to relax and sat back to the floor.

"What..." Harry searched for the words, "what about Malfoy? I gave him the mark and I think it's working the same way."

"I know, Harry," Remus replied coldly, his voice a bit tight. "We're watching him." Harry furled his brow.

"Watching him?" he asked.

"Bit of a twist, don't you think?" Remus said grimly and the look turned Harry's stomach. "Voldemort curses you in hopes that you'll attack your own, only to find the son of one of his own Death Eaters cursed with the same magic." Remus' face turned dark. "With luck, little Master Malfoy will meet up with his father and the two will play a visit to Auntie Bellatrix. It is Christmas after all. I don't suppose it much matters who wins." Remus stood looking at the photo on the table. "For the last couple days, we've had a house elf following him, just to make sure no accidents occur on school grounds."

"Remus, you can't!" Harry exclaimed. "Professor Dumbledore would never..."

"In case you haven't noticed, Harry, Dumbledore is a bit indisposed," Remus interrupted as he took to his feet. "You, of all people, know what kind of wizards the Malfoy's are. Ginny, Hermione, and countless others would be dead if their dark hearts had their way." His voice was cool, almost icy. "Cedric is dead. Sirius is dead. How many more need to die?"

"Draco didn't have anything to do with that! It was his father."

"I think we both know better. Don't you?"

Harry's mind began to race. It was all too much to take in at one time. One thing was certain; he wouldn't put Gabriella's life at risk again. He jumped off his broom and looked at the eyes staring back at him... werewolf eyes. He needed time to think, but not here, not now. For the first time, he felt that it was all beyond him somehow, spinning out of control, threads of thoughts he couldn't bring together. He needed... he needed Hermione. The last person, Harry thought, he would ever be willing to talk to, and the last person who would be willing to talk to him. Still, he had to try.

"I'll go to hospital tonight for a check, but that's it, no removal. I have exams in the morning. If you can have a house elf following Malfoy, you can have one follow me," Harry said calmly. Remus looked at Dobby and then to Harry. "There's no point trying to remove something that can't be removed. If I'm destined to go mad, so be it." Remus shook his head, no.

"Harry we can't take the risk. We have to..." Harry jumped back on his broom and pointed toward the red curtain. "Okay!" Remus yelled. "But Dobby can't follow you; he needs to rest."

"No, not Dobby," Harry agreed.

Quietly, the three made their way to the hospital wing where, not surprisingly, Madame Pomfrey was waiting. Seamus was sleeping in the bed by the door and the healer ushered Harry down to the far end of the room, pulling a curtain around him. Once Harry was in bed, Remus turned to leave.

"Harry," he said, "you should know that Hermione wants to tell you everything about her recent... activities. But, I've asked her not to. Your link to Voldemort is too strong and there are some things better left unknown. Don't blame your friends, Harry, blame me. Come on Dobby, we need to have you looked at as well." Remus slipped out behind the curtain.

Alone, Harry simply looked up at the ceiling. The room was quiet and warm as he listened to their steps fade off into nothingness. If it was Voldemort behind this curse, Harry wasn't going to give him a second chance. He shut his eyes and began to empty his mind -- soon he was asleep.

When he awoke, the curtains had been pulled open. The room was bright and standing at his bedside was Hermione Granger. Her brown hair hung about her shoulders and she wore an insecure smile.

"Hello sleepyhead," she whispered and reached down to hold Harry's hand. "How are you feeling?" Harry blinked his eyes adjusting to the light and he tried to smile back.

"Fine. What are you smiling about?"

"When you didn't return last night, I thought for sure you'd left. I should have known you would come here to see what was wrong. If I'd have stayed with Seamus longer, I would have seen you, but I wanted to get back to Gryffindor to see if you were okay."

"Seamus," Harry said excitedly, "how is he?"

"Passed me Defense Against The Dark Arts exam, I did. Shame yeh missed it." Standing from a seat at the foot of Harry's bed, Seamus walked over to Harry's side. "Doesn't look too cursed if yeh ask me, Hermione." Harry wasn't sure what to say.

"Remus thought we should know about your... problem," Hermione said tentatively. "And yes, you've slept through till lunch. He said he was passing you on merit and that it would be best if you could rest."

Harry sat up, picked his glasses from off the table and slipped them on.

“Seamus, I... I...”

“That’s the mark then?” Seamus interrupted with a bit of excitement in his voice. Harry, in a hospital gown, looked down at his exposed arm. There on his forearm was the snake and sword, raised and red.

“Madame Pomfrey’s tried everything to remove it,” Hermione said. “I’m afraid... well... it’s just gotten worse.”

“I told them...” said Harry through gritted teeth, but then he took a deep breath. “Yes, Seamus,” Harry answered with a solid voice. “That’s the mark. I doubt most folks would understand.”

“Dean says it’s Tibetan,” Seamus replied, not really paying much attention to what Harry was saying. Harry started to speak, but Seamus interrupted. “Look Harry, we had a pretty bad go of it last year, and this year wasn’t much better. But I’ll be damned if I let Voldemort decide who’s me friend and who isn’t.” Seamus held out his hand smiling, and Harry took it. Seamus started for the door whistling a Muggle tune Harry remembered from the summer.

“The Steel Chords?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Seamus answered with a bit of surprise. “Saw ‘em in Dublin over the summer; even got the T-shirt.” Then he shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Me da insisted he come. It was still great, until someone let off a bomb at a nearby Muggle police station.” He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, and walked through the door.

“I hate bombs,” said Harry, putting his head back down on his pillow. There was an uncomfortable moment of silence as Hermione stood at Harry’s bedside.

“Listen,” the two spoke simultaneously.

“You go.” Harry smiled.

"No, you," Hermione answered.

"If you want to tell me to bugger off, I'll understand," began Harry, looking down at his hands. Hermione said nothing. "But I... well, I need you. I can't do this by myself. If what they say is right, if I start to go mad... I... Gabriella...." He lost his voice and his eyes began to glisten.

"Shh," Hermione whispered, taking his hand. "We need each other, Harry." She cast a glance at the door and bit her lower lip. "Harry, you said no secrets and I've kept the truth from you for far too long. I can't do it anymore. It's time you knew that I've been..."

"No, Hermione," Harry interrupted. "I don't want to know. I don't think Remus is right, but if he is... if Voldemort's reading my thoughts, I can't know." Hermione tried to speak again, but Harry held up his hand, and she nodded. "You know I'd trust you with my life, right?" he asked, and she smiled back, but Harry's face turned grim and he looked to the ceiling. "I would have killed him, Hermione. I wanted to kill him. If it happens again, you've got to take me down."

"Well, we've taken some steps to make sure that it doesn't happen again."

"A house elf?" asked Harry, casting his eyes around the room. "A house elf won't stop me anymore; you know that."

"Better," Hermione answered. "Madame Pomfrey couldn't remove the charm, but she's placed a blocking spell that will help. If your mind turns to rage, you'll start whistling."

"Like Seamus?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione laughed, "he whistles much better than you ever could." Just then Ron entered the room.

"Hey, mate," he said with a bright smile. "Heard you might be up for lunch." Grinning the whole way, he walked over to Harry's side, then glanced to Hermione. "Has he started whistling, yet?"

"No," said Hermione, smiling back. "Not yet."

"What? Does everybody know?" Harry exclaimed.

"Well," said Ron, "by lunch they will. Sort of a Hogwarts early warning system, Remus figures. You start whistling and we all duck for cover." At first Harry was exasperated, but then a sly smile began to cross his face.

"This could be fun," he said, looking at Ron over the top of his glasses and whistling a few notes.

"That would not be appropriate, Harry Potter," Hermione scowled. Ron just rolled his eyes. "Besides, it's lunchtime. You need to eat and then take your Charms exam, so there isn't much time."

"Charms?" Harry gulped.

"We also, I think, have a few things we need to discuss," said Ron as he gathered Harry's clothes.

"Yes," Harry agreed. "It's time we pulled our heads together. I know he's only looking out for me and all, but I think Remus is wrong. I'd know if this was Voldemort, at least I think I would." Harry sat up on the edge of his bed. "I need your help."

"That's what we're here for, mate," Ron said with a smile. "That's what we're here for."

Chapter 41 - A Reason to Be

Harry set his quill down on the desk next to the parchment. His hand was cramped, his back ached, and he was so tired he considered laying his head down and going to sleep. Still, it was as if a great weight had been taken from his shoulders. The sky was blue and the sun bright as it streamed into the classroom. An odd contradiction to the subject matter he'd just finished describing--astronomy. He had completed his last end of term exam and was sure that he'd passed. A smile creased his lips as Professor Sinistra summoned the papers to her desk. As everyone started to leave she raised her hand and asked for silence. Harry glanced over at Dean who deliberately ignored him as he put his things into his pack. The smile left Harry's face.

"I know this has been a tremendously difficult term for you all this year," Professor Sinistra began. Her voice was steady, but sad. "Particularly for you sixth years. You have lost two dear friends to the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Know this, however, as you begin your winter vacation. They are, at this very moment, reaching out for you. Keep them in your hearts and think of them at every turn. As are the heavens, so too are we all bound together, no matter the distance. Your thoughts may provide them the sustenance they need to survive." She straightened the papers on her desk for a second time, sighed, and mustered a smile. "Dismissed... and Happy Christmas."

Harry gathered his things and made his way back to Gryffindor tower. A day, an hour, hadn't gone by that he didn't think of Neville and Luna. They were suffering under Voldemort's hand because of Harry, and the Dark Lord's words, "We're all waiting for you... coward," echoed in Harry's mind day and night. But the Order was handling it, Tonks was still chasing them down and there was little to nothing Harry could do. Still, despite Remus' warnings, Harry continued to work with Ron and Hermione to try and determine how students were being captured and where they were being hidden. Hermione was convinced that a professor had something to do with the disappearances, and Ron was certain that, somehow, Draco Malfoy was to blame.

Above the din of thoughts of Dark Lords and Dementors, a tiny ray of light shone through. Tomorrow he would travel the Hogwarts Express, newly repaired, back to London, and from there catch the bus home. Thoughts of Gabriella swirled in his mind as he passed through the portrait of the Fat Lady. When he climbed the staircase to his dorm room, he found Ron and Goyle packing for the holiday. Goyle, however, was packing everything. In January he would return to Slytherin; there was a true sadness in his demeanor that Harry had not seen before.

"You know, Greg," Ron said, chewing gum and packing his bags for tomorrow's departure, "you've got top marks in Dark Arts. I'll bet Flitwick would let you have another go of it for the Charms N.E.W.T." Goyle shook his head.

"Nah," he replied dismissively, "I already told you, Ron. My ticket outta here is Quidditch, not this." He tapped his head with his wand.

"Er, Ron," Harry interrupted. "I think they're about ready downstairs." Ron looked at Harry and nodded. Goyle looked confused.

"Ready for what?" he asked looking at Ron. The redhead sat down next to Goyle and slapped his ham-like leg.

"When you go back to your old chums, you'll have quite a few choices to make," Ron answered. "Do you want to be a Slytherin leader in Dumbledore's Army, or Malfoy's lap hound again? You've learned a lot of Gryffindor secrets and some of us around here don't think you should take them with you. It'll take true courage to hold tight to what you've learned here. Some don't think you have what it takes, but there's a couple that do. Come on, let's go." Behind Goyle's back Ron winked at Harry, who smiled back. The three made their way down to the common room and found it packed with every Gryffindor student at Hogwarts. The faces staring at Goyle were dark and sour. The scene was reminiscent of his first night as a Gryffindor, and a look of apprehension began to spread across his face as he looked at those he had come to call friends.

Lloyd Wade and Barbara McNulty, the Gryffindor Head Boy and Head Girl, stepped forward. Barbara carried a small mahogany box in front

of her and the gathering of Gryffindors parted as they approached Goyle who was now standing at the fireplace.

“When you came to Gryffindor,” Lloyd began, his voice deep and stoic, “we asked you remove the Slytherin signet ring from your finger. Now that you return from whence you came, it is yours to wear again.” Ron dropped the ring in Lloyd’s hand and he in turn handed it to Goyle. Goyle looked at the silver snake and emerald eyes glaring back at him and hesitated. “There’s no denying that the Sorting Hat placed you in Slytherin. Place it on your finger.” Slowly, Goyle slipped the ring on. Barbara stepped forward, the mahogany box still in her hands.

“You have shown us a side of Slytherin,” she began, “we would never have thought possible: the use of cunning, the application of strength and power, and a love for magic. In Gryffindor we prize, of course, bravery, but perhaps most of all loyalty.” As she opened the box, the lid blocked Goyle’s view of what was inside. “We would never presume that you wear the signet ring of Gryffindor, though many here called for it.” Smiles began to seep into the faces across the room. “Instead, we offer you this.” She pulled from the box a golden chain and as she lifted further she revealed a ruby encrusted pendent, the signet of Gryffindor. “We ask that you wear this where it matters most, close to your heart. For that is where you will remain for all of us here. If ever you are in need, know that a Gryffindor will answer your call.” The room exploded in cheers and applause. Goyle took the pendent and placed it about his neck. For a moment he couldn’t catch his breath, but as the room quieted he began to speak.

“Three months,” he breathed, and then gathering strength to his voice, “the greatest time of my life. I will wear this where it matters.” And he slipped the pendant inside his shirt, patting it against his heart. “I’ll never forget this time. I know I’m going back to Slytherin, but I hope we can maintain our friendships.” He cast a glance at Parvati who blushed ever so slightly. “Know too, that if ever a Gryffindor calls for help, Gregory Goyle will come to their aid.” He smiled broadly. “Even Harry!” The room broke out in laughter and slowly everyone came to shake Goyle’s hand and then start back on their packing. When the room finally cleared, Ron and Goyle began to make their way back up to the boys’ dormitory.

"What do you say we go for one last spin out on the pitch?" Harry asked. At first, Ron's eager face looked like it would say yes, but then his face fell, or at least he looked uncomfortable.

"Well, erm..." the redhead began in a lurch. "Hermione and I were going to, er..."

"I'll go Harry," Goyle said, smiling.

"Great!" Harry grinned back. "We'll catch you at dinner Ron!"

Before you could say Snitch, Goyle and Harry were out on the pitch tossing the Quaffle back and forth, making occasional shots at the rings.

"You know I'll take your head off when Slytherin plays Gryffindor this spring!" Goyle shouted out.

"I'll be lucky to still have my head this spring!" Harry yelled back, firing a shot through the center ring. Goyle dove down to retrieve it, but Harry tilted on the Caduceus and grabbed it first. "Think you can keep up?" challenged Harry, and in a flash he was heading down to the far end of the pitch, Goyle in hot pursuit. Harry quickly swerved to the right and was headed straight for the stands, Goyle in tow. At the last instant, Harry pulled up, but Goyle's broom, coupled with his mass, could not negotiate the turn and he rammed straight into the wooden banister on the side of the stands. Harry was quickly at Goyle's side and as he regrouped and gathered his balance they both noticed a good sized gash on Goyle's right shoulder.

"You're hurt!" Harry called out.

"Not as hurt as you're gonna be when I catch you!" Goyle yelled, a devilish smile across his face. Quickly he shot toward Harry, who responded instantly. Happily zooming through the air, they were leaving the pitch as Harry tried, only half-heartedly, to lose Goyle. Without paying too much attention, they found themselves over the Forbidden Forest, Harry skimming the treetops and occasionally diving into open spaces. Still, Goyle was undaunted and followed

Harry as if he were on a string. Suddenly, the forest opened up into a large clearing. The waterfall that Harry had seen with Cho was below, plummeting from between a crevice into a crystal blue pool of water.

"It's here!" Harry yelled out, stopping. "I knew it!" An instant later Goyle popped him on the back nearly launching him off his broom.

"Gotcha!" he called, spinning to face Harry. His sleeve was red with blood, but his face was all smiles. "Have you ever seen so many trees, Harry? Do they ever end?"

"What do you make of that?" Harry said pointing to the pools below.

"What?" Goyle asked turning to look. Suddenly a creature shot past Harry's shoulder heading straight for Goyle. It was a large Threstral.

"Look out!" Harry yelled, but too late. The creature careened into Goyle knocking him from his broom. Harry instantly dove to stop Goyle's fall. He was wrapping himself around Harry's broom when another Threstral appeared from the forest. Harry summoned Goyle's broom and handed it back to him.

"Merlin!" Goyle cried out. "What are they?" The fall had made his wound open and blood began to flow more freely.

"It's your cut," Harry answered hurriedly. "We need to get out of here. They think you're dinner!" Quickly the two shot back toward the castle some eight or ten Threstrals following behind. When they crossed onto Hogwarts grounds, however, the pursuit stopped, and the Threstrals climbed and turned back toward the forest. At the steps to the castle, breathing heavily they both dismounted their brooms.

"Let me see that," Harry said a bit heatedly. He held out his wand and blue light quickly healed the wound on Goyle's shoulder. "I've never seen them attack a human before. I don't suppose they'd eat you, but you do look sort of like a side of beef."

"What were those things?" Goyle asked.

“Well, if you hadn’t been such a prig in Hagrid’s class last year, you’d know.” Then Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Didn’t you see them on the coaches at the start of term? One ran you down, as I recall.”

“One of those?” Goyle exclaimed. “Never seen one ‘till now.”

“But you only see them if you’ve seen death,” Harry said, almost asking the question with his words. At this, Goyle turned pale and took a deep breath.

“I saw you die, Harry,” he whispered. “We all saw it; only I was the one that killed you.” Harry silently nodded, and without saying another word the two returned to the castle.

The hallways were filled with students laughing, popping off crackers, and generally releasing the tension of the last few weeks. It was almost time for dinner and students were making their way down to the Great Hall. Harry and Goyle began to climb the steps to Gryffindor tower when an oily voice called from behind.

“Well, well, don’t you two make the perfect couple.” Malfoy’s steel eyes were glaring at them both as he leaned against a pillar obviously, at least to Harry, waiting for them to return. “I thought,” Malfoy drawled, “you would be dashing back to Slytherin tonight, Goyle. But instead you’re out playing tag on a broomstick... with a madman no less.” The words raised the hair on the back of Harry’s neck, but it was Goyle that stepped in front of Harry and toward Malfoy.

After his attack of Seamus, ‘Madman’ was the phrase Harry was labeled with as he walked the halls on his way to meals, or class, or anywhere. While the words were more painful than most knew, things might have been much worse if Seamus hadn’t come down to the Great Hall the morning after. In front of the whole school, he started laughing with Harry, patting him on the back. It was deliberate and loud on Seamus’ part, for which Harry was extremely grateful. Still, there were a few, particularly in Slytherin, who hissed Harry’s new moniker whenever they had the chance.

"The only madman I see," Goyle said, glaring menacingly, "is you, Draco." Unphased, Draco, simply smiled and began to clap in a slow rhythmic beat.

"Very good, very good," Malfoy sneered. "Potter, I'm impressed. You've trained him well." Goyle began to lunge toward Malfoy, but Harry grabbed his shirt.

"Hang on, Greg," Harry said calmly. "Look, let me take care of this. Go on back and clean up. I'll meet you and the guys later in the Great Hall for dinner." Goyle stood frozen, fire pouring from his eyes. "Really, Greg, go on." After a moment, Goyle finally began to walk away, and then looked back over his shoulder.

"If you're not there in twenty minutes, Harry..."

"I'll be fine," Harry answered, pulling his wand. At that, Goyle seemed satisfied and strode off toward Gryffindor tower. Then Harry turned to Malfoy. "Why must you be such an ass? Is it genetic or something?"

"This won't work, Harry," Malfoy sneered quietly, if people think we're..."

Harry held up his hand stopping Malfoy in mid-sentence. He shook his head and looked around, then motioned to Malfoy to follow him toward a classroom. Cracking the door he shoved Malfoy through then slipped in himself and then locked the door.

"Can house elves go through walls?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Malfoy answered, a bit befuddled.

"Damn," Harry hissed, his eyes darting around the room. Malfoy began to understand and pulled his wand.

"Tego," he whispered. A white light burst from his wand in an ever-expanding ball. When the light hit the walls, it lingered and for a moment the walls glowed. When the light faded, Malfoy spoke again. "Father would send Dobby to my room to spy on me, and report back. The spell lasts only a few minutes, but it was long enough for Dobby

to decide it was more important to start cleaning. You're being followed for attacking Seamus, aren't you?" he asked. Harry searched the room once again looking for the slightest movement. On a desk was a text -- Runes of the East. On its cover were three runes, one that looked identical to the crossed lightning bolts on Harry's forearm.

"Come on, Harry," Malfoy called out. "We only have a few more minutes."

"Viswa Vajra," Harry whispered, touching the picture on the book's cover.

"What?"

"Draco, you said you were being protected somehow. Do you think it's the mark on your face?"

"Hardly a mark, Potter," Malfoy replied rubbing the red scar that ran from the corner of his eye. "But yes, twice, maybe three times I've avoided spells or enchanted items I didn't know were coming. If it's not this bloody scar, I don't know what it is. Now get on with it!" Harry turned to look at Malfoy.

"You're being followed, Draco, not me. I've been hexed with a protection charm meant for Muggles, not wizards. They believe I've passed the same hex on to you."

"So what?" Draco asked flatly. "You're protected and I am too. How can that be bad?"

"Because this Muggle hex, or whatever it is I've passed on to you, drives wizards mad. They come to believe that they're being attacked at the slightest provocation. The protection kicks in and they kill all who threaten them."

"That's why you attacked Finnigan?" asked Malfoy, a hint of concern flushing his face.

“Yes... maybe. He’s not the first I’ve wanted to... to hurt. They say I’m going crazy, Draco. They say I’ve become, or am becoming a madman because of the mark. At least they think I am, and they believe... they hope... you’ll be one too.”

“Hope? What are you talking about? Who’s they? Why would—”

“Let’s say you are, Draco, infected that is. Let’s say that in, oh, I don’t know, a day or two you decide to attack someone that taps you on the shoulder. Tell me, what happens if little Mr. Malfoy goes home for Christmas and gets in an argument with daddy? What happens if Auntie Bellatrix tells you to leave the room and you don’t want to? Boom! That’s what happens.”

“That’s madness! Dumbledore would never—”

“Dumbledore’s dying!” Harry shot back. “What was it you said, Malfoy? The Ministry’s growing concerned about that tottering old fool of a Headmaster. Dumbledore’s not running Hogwarts and Lupin has his own plans filled with hate for those that killed Sirius.” Harry clenched his fists and kicked over a chair; he could feel the anger roiling inside him again. “Me, they put a hex on so that if I get angry, I whistle. The house elf follows you and makes sure the madness doesn’t consume you here at Hogwarts, but when you go home, they don’t care! Worse, we can’t discuss our plans with a house elf running about, waiting for an opportunity to chatter back to Lupin.”

“You are insane, Potter!” Draco cried out with a bit of a tremor in his voice. The oh-so-smug veneer was stripping away. “We leave tomorrow! And you’re telling me I’m a freaking, walking, time-bomb! If it’s true, you won’t see me again. They’ll see to that.” Malfoy began to tremble, breathing heavily and leaning against the wall. “You’ve... you’ve seen them! You know what they’ll do. They’ll kill me if I so much as look like I’ll raise my wand the wrong way, Potter.”

Harry had seen Malfoy scared before, running in the Forbidden Forest, or hiding behind Crabbe and Goyle. But he’d never seen him like this. The last time they met in a classroom, Malfoy revealed there was humanity buried beneath the surface and now... vulnerability. Harry walked over and put his hand on Malfoy’s shoulder.

"Nobody's going to die, Draco," Harry said calmly. "They're wrong. He's wrong... I hope. I... er, have a theory." Harry glanced over at the book on the desk.

"A theory?" Malfoy cried. "A theory?"

Harry turned Malfoy's shoulders and sat him in a chair. Then lowering himself on one knee, he pulled back his right hand and punched Malfoy square in the face knocking both the blonde and the chair backwards onto the floor. Harry winced as a shot of pain exploded from where he had been skewered by Goyle's broom. The injury had still not completely healed. Still, his blow landed true. Malfoy crumpled off the chair, shook his head to clear it, and instantly pulled his wand pointing it at Harry.

"Relash..." Malfoy tried to call out, but before the spell could leave his lips, his face burst into pain. "Argh!" he cried, holding his hands to his left cheek and dropping his wand. At the same time, Harry's arm flared and he doubled over to the floor.

"You felt that," Harry spat through clenched teeth. "Don't you see? We're linked, you and me, but what was placed on me is not the same as what was placed on you. Look!" Harry pulled up his sleeve revealing the scar blazing on his forearm. "Do you see?" Malfoy stumbled over to Harry's side and sat on the floor. He grabbed Harry's arm and held it, staring at the scar. His finger traced the blade down to the wrist where it stopped. There Malfoy tapped twice on the two lightning bolts that crossed at the tip of the sword. "Exactly," Harry said.

"Viswa Vajra," Malfoy muttered.

"Geese!" Harry cried with exasperation. "How is it everyone knows what the symbol is but me?" Sitting back, Malfoy smiled.

"Elementary school, Harry," chided Malfoy. "Elementary school." Harry simply rolled his eyes, and shook his head. Malfoy's smile had contorted the scar on his face, which was now a deep scarlet. Harry held his hand to it.

"I'm sorry for this, Draco. If I had to do it over..."

"I know... you would have blasted me out the window," said Malfoy smugly. Harry shoved him on the shoulder.

"The point is it's not the same protection. I meant it for you, a wizard, and somehow it protects you against magical attacks, not Muggle ones. You won't threaten your Death Eater friends. You won't go mad... just me." Harry pulled down his sleeve and stood, but Malfoy's eyes clearly doubted his words. "Hermione checked!" Harry lied.

At this, Malfoy seemed satisfied and Harry took his hand and helped him stand. There was a rustling at the door and the two students knew they were now no longer alone. Malfoy looked at Harry.

"My father always taught me to turn disadvantages to advantages, Potter. Deficits to attributes. I will deal with this," he shot a glance to the door, "in the same way."

"You'd better have that face of yours looked at, Malfoy." Harry sneered, trying to act angry. "Although most people are used to you having a swollen head."

Harry started for the door with Malfoy close behind. For an instant, as they passed into the corridor, their knuckles touched in a silent, secret handshake and then they split apart, each heading in opposite directions.

When Harry arrived at the Great Hall for dinner, it was bursting with energy and laughter. Students were eating, and talking, and every now and then a cracker or sparkler would light off. Seamus was having his last dinner with the Ravenclaws and at the Gryffindor table Goyle sat next to Ron, Hermione, and to his surprise Parvati.

"I didn't see that," Harry whispered to himself with a smile. Hermione waved him over.

He passed by the Ravenclaw table when someone grabbed his arm. He almost pulled his wand, before he realized it was Cho.

“Hi,” she said, smiling.

Looking down at her eyes, Harry’s heart skipped. “Hi,” he said, smiling back.

“I wanted to thank you for watching over James. He idolizes you, you know.” She ran her hand through her black hair and smiled broader. “Are you going home for Christmas?”

“Erm, yeah,” Harry muttered, “to see the family and all.”

“No,” Cho’s eyes narrowed, “to see her.” Harry blushed, and said nothing. “There are things witches can do, Harry, that a Muggle girl could never even dream of, let alone a wizard boy. You do know that don’t you?” Harry suddenly became aware that Marietta was listening intently, as were three other girls sitting around Cho at the Ravenclaw table.

“Things?” Harry’s voice cracked, and they all broke out in laughter.

“You’ll see... sooner than you think, Harry Potter,” Cho answered slyly. “I promise.” Marietta and the other girls howled, but Cho’s eyes were frozen with confidence. “Happy Christmas, Harry,” she said, standing on her own two feet and kissing Harry gently on the cheek. A blast of tingling frost seemed to spread across his face. “Have I got a surprise for you,” she breathed into his ear and a cold shiver ran down the back of his neck, although he was sure his face was flaming.

“Happy C-Christmas,” Harry’s voice cracked, and then he turned and continued to the Gryffindor table. Sitting between Ron and Parvati he just looked into space for a moment rubbing his face.

“What was that about?” Ron asked. When Harry told them, Ron shook his head in agreement. “Well, she’s right on that point, Harry. Why, just the other day... ouch!” Ron reached down to his shin and looked across the table at Hermione whose eyes were flaming sparks in his direction. “Yeah, er, well... want some turkey?”

The group ate and shared plans for their vacation. Ron was returning to Grimmauld place, where Charlie and even Percy were going to be home for Christmas dinner. Hermione was going home with her parents, but planned to spend time at Grimmauld for the New Year. It also appeared that Goyle and Parvati were trying to figure out a way they could meet over the holiday. Everyone was coupling off and for no reason, Ron's face fell. He looked down at Ginny who was sitting next to Dean. She'd been crying earlier in the morning just thinking about how she'd be away from him for two weeks. But Dean had insisted he was not going to the Weasley home without everyone's approval, and everyone meant Ron.

"Dean!" Ron called out. "Can you rip yourself away from my sister for a sec?" Dean just glared back. "Come on," Ron beckoned. Ginny tilted her head for Dean to see what it was about, and Dean walked over and sat between Harry and Ron.

"Potter," Dean said shortly toward Harry, and then he turned to look at Ron. "What is it Weasley?" Ron shifted his weight and took a deep breath.

"I think you should know that I've been an arse, and I'm sorry. I think you... no, I... I insist that you come to our house over the holidays." There was an awkward silence. "Maybe a day or two. It's a big place and I think we can place enough protection charms to keep you from accidentally sleepwalking into Ginny's room at night." At this Dean smiled and slowly began to nod his head in agreement.

"Okay," Dean said, shaking Ron's hand. "I, er, well... thank you, Ron."

"Don't thank me, thank Harry," said Ron. "It's his place. I'd never invite you to stay at the Burrow. It's too small. You and Ginny would be cramped up next to each other all day." Dean looked at Harry who was looking kindly back.

"Thanks, Harry." Then he turned back to Ron. "How do I get there?"

"Ah, yes," Ron stammered. "Well, that's a bit tricky really. We need to ask Professor Lupin, but I'm sure he'll say it's okay." Hearing these words, a rolling thunderhead loomed dark across Harry's eyes.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You'll have to ask who?" Ron lowered his head shooting glances up and down the table. "It's my bloody house!"

"It's normally Dumbledore's job," Ron whispered. "You remember, Harry?" The words spun Harry back in time to when he first met the Order of the Phoenix... a simple piece of paper with narrow handwriting, stating where the Order might be found -- number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Sirius offered up his home to help fight Voldemort, a home now left to Harry, and with Dumbledore ill, or worse, Harry felt a deepening sense of remorse and anger welling up inside him, and it was all targeted at Remus Lupin.

"What do you mean? Who put Remus in charge?" With each passing moment, the anger and guilt swirled with his already unsteady emotions, growing more intense, almost beyond his control. It was all he could do to keep his voice low when he grabbed Ron by the robes and pulled him close behind Dean's back. "Is he... is Lupin also in charge of the Order?" Harry snapped. Ron reluctantly nodded.

"Until Dumbledore gets better, Harry."

"But why didn't he say?" Harry shot back. "Why didn't he tell me? It's... it's my house, right? And... and why is it you know, and I don't?" Dean, sitting between the two, was caught in a ping-pong match of words that was more ping than pong. "Is it my bloody house, or isn't it?" Now everyone around was looking at Harry and a few were looking concerned. Ron sheepishly nodded.

"Dean," Harry spat, standing from the bench, "you're coming for the holiday! I don't give a damn what Remus Lupin says." Harry stormed up to the head table where Remus was eating and leaned in to the Professor's ear.

"You want him to die, don't you?" Harry hissed. "You're waiting for the old buzzard to croak, so you can have it all! Is that it Remus?" cried Harry, feeling the rage swell within him. "Kill 'em all, eh, werewolf?"

Professor Lupin furled his eyebrows in either anger or concern. "Don't play dumb with me!" Harry shouted at the top of his lungs pulling his wand and all heads turned in the Great Hall to the front table in a great gasp. "I know what..." suddenly Harry's stomach lurched and an insatiable urge to whistle took over. In the next instant he was whistling to all of Hogwarts a tune he'd heard over the summer. A few bars in to the song, the room broke out in laughter and applause. Harry, unable to stop, felt the anger fade to embarrassment and returned to the Gryffindor table, where Hermione took him gently by the arm.

"Breathe, Harry," she said calmly, "deep breaths." Harry sat back on the bench and a moment later regained control. Seeing Harry a bit disoriented, Hermione smiled nervously. "Well, I guess we know that works."

"I won't w-wet him do w-it..." Harry sputtered in a half-whistle. Dean shook his head in confusion and walked over to Ginny telling her the news that he'd be seeing her over the holiday and she grabbed Dean and squeezed him tight.

"Really, Ron?" she yelled out. When Ron nodded, she rushed over and kissed him on the cheek, causing his face to match his hair. "You're the greatest, you know that don't you?" She kissed his other cheek and ran back to Dean racing on about all that they would do in London.

"I'm tired," Harry said flatly, finally gathering his composure. "I'm going to bed."

"But they're having a dance after dinner, Harry," Hermione said, trying to encourage him to stay. "It might lift your spirits." Harry spread a false toothy smile across his face.

"Yeah, right, so everyone can stare at the madman, Harry Potter." He took one last look at the head table, and while his eyes blazed at Remus, his heart felt nothing but contempt. "You're not Dumbledore," he breathed.

When Harry passed through the portrait of the Fat Lady into the common room, he found it nearly deserted. Most everyone had decided to stay at the dance and only a few first years were scattered about chatting. One, a boy with blonde hair Harry had seen but didn't know, stood staring out the window. Not really knowing why, Harry walked over and looked out with him. It was snowing again and the castle grounds were lit by the waxing moon. Icicles fell off the eaves and plummeted to the ground shattering in a spectacular flash of coloured light.

"Excited about getting back home?" Harry asked. "Chance to tell your parents about your first term at Hogwarts?" There was a moment of silence before the young boy spoke.

"No," he sighed, "I'm stayin' at Hogwarts this Christmas."

"But what about your family?" Harry questioned, turning to face the ten year old.

"Me ma an' da died in a car crash last year." There was a long pause as Harry tried to understand, but couldn't. The young boy was used to the expression hanging on Harry's face, much as Harry had come to expect the stares at his forehead. "They were Muggles," the boy replied to Harry's questioning eyes. "I walked away from it." The boy held his hand to the glass and then tilted his forehead till it too met the pane, and looked blankly out into the night. "Just, walked away. If I'd a known what I could do then, maybe I could a saved 'em." The boy shuddered and Harry heard the splash of tears on the floor.

"What's your name?" Harry asked quietly.

"Patrick... Patrick O'Riley," he sniffed, his head still against the glass. Harry nodded and stood there looking out the window at his side.

"I spent the last five years of Christmases here at Hogwarts. It's great, you'll see." There was a long pause. "I... I don't know if you heard, but I lost my parents too." Patrick wiped his eyes with his sleeve and looked up at Harry.

“When I heard I was teh be in Gryffindor... in the same house as Harry Potter... someone who might know... know what it felt teh...” he burst out crying and put his arms around Harry who held him tight. Holding Patrick, sobbing in his arms, Harry looked out at the beauty of the falling snow and the occasional bursts of colour shattering in the night. Once again, his mind turned to Luna and Neville, lost somewhere out there in the darkness and as the moon rose in the sky, a tear tumbled down his own cheek.

From the day he first walked into the Wizing world, he had endured the stares at his scar, the gawks, and hushed whispers. How many times had he been praised or jeered as The Famous Harry Potter? He loathed his name; he detested his scar; he despised his history. And yet, here, for the first time in his life, on a chance meeting with a kid he’d never thought of twice... his name meant something... something of value. Harry let go and lifted Patrick’s chin with his hand.

“It gets better,” he said smiling, “you’ll see; friends make all the difference.” Harry held out his hand, opened his palm, and conjured a handkerchief. Patrick’s eyes grew wide. “Here.” Harry grinned and handed the handkerchief to Patrick. “How ‘bout I make you a deal... a deal to the end. I’ll watch your back, if you watch mine. What do you say? We orphans... we’ve got to stick together, eh?” Harry held out his hand and Patrick, with the slightest of smiles, shook it. Harry took in a deep breath.

“You know,” Harry said, “there’s no point in sulking around this dull place. I hear there’s a dance tonight in the Great Hall; how about we go check it out?” Wiping his eyes with the handkerchief, Patrick smiled fully.

“Sounds great,” he said with a much lighter voice. “James told me there might be a live band.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” said Harry, putting his arm around Patrick and heading to the door. “Let’s go see.” Together, the two orphans passed through the portrait of the Fat Lady, leaving their troubles for tomorrow.

Chapter 42 - Out of Love, True Power

The sound of merriment filled the Gryffindor common room as Harry and his friends made their way back from the dance. Harry had just told them the story of how he'd somehow made a chocolate-mint ice-cream cone attack Malcolm Smelt at the pool last summer and Dean couldn't help but double over with laughter.

Harry had spent much of the dance talking to people who were, instead of calling him a madman, encouraging him to fight on. Just days earlier, Harry nearly left Hogwarts ignorant of the depth of support he had from both his friends and the students, like Patrick, who he barely knew at all. But more importantly, the past two hours spent talking and laughing at the dance had cleared the air between Harry and his dorm mates. Discovering that Harry had a girlfriend in Little Whinging, Dean let go of his jealousy of Harry, and Ron apologized to Dean for being an arse all school year. It wasn't long before Dean, Harry and Ron began discussing their plans for Dean's Christmas visit to Grimmauld Place. The plans were getting so complex and time consuming that Ginny was wondering if Dean would have any time for her.

"I think I liked it better when you three weren't talking to each other," she whispered in Harry's ear at the dance. "I'm not sure I want to share Dean when he visits."

Harry smiled as he looked across the sea of students. He began to see glimmers of Dumbledore's dream for Hogwarts. Students from different houses who had come to know each other during DA meetings were mixing and mingling. He was most surprised seeing students from Ravenclaw and Slytherin dancing with each other. Patrick found James Cho by the snack buffet and the two spent most of their time with two first year girls from Hufflepuff. "Interesting," thought Harry. "If it hadn't been for Patrick...."

Back in the common room, the fifth years seemed to cluster about the fireplace. Even though they were all exhausted, nobody wanted to go to sleep. Finally, Goyle announced he was heading upstairs. He had taken a couple steps up to the boys' dorm when Parvati ran over and whispered something in his ear. They then hugged and she kissed

his cheek. Nobody said a word when she returned to stand at the mantelpiece.

"He's quite nice you know," she said, trying to justify her attraction. "I mean... for a Slytherin."

"Slytherin has nothing to do with it, Parvati," Harry said. "He's just plain Greg Goyle and you'd be hard pressed to find a better bloke in Hogwarts." A grand smile spread across Parvati's face as those gathered around the fireplace nodded their assent. Harry yawned, blinking blankly at the fire. Finally, shaking the cobwebs from his mind, he announced, "I'm off to bed too. Goodnight."

When Harry got upstairs he found Goyle already in bed and, to Harry's surprise, reading. Harry undressed and sat at the side of his own bed. "I thought you were tired," he said, his mind cluttered and groggy.

"I saw Flitwick this evening, and Ron was right," Goyle answered over his book. "I can retest for Charms after the holiday."

"That's excellent, Greg!"

"Don't tell anybody. Okay, Harry? I don't need the pressure if this falls through. And anybody includes Ron."

"No problem," said Harry smiling back. He looked up to see Goyle looking, not at him, but past him over his shoulder. "What?" he asked, turning to see what Goyle was looking at. He had tossed his shirt on his desk where the dragonhead sat next to a burning candle. Goyle looked down at his text and then back up at the desk. "What is it Goyle?" Harry asked again.

"The ball... it's cinnabar, right?" he asked looking back at his text.

"I don't know," Harry answered. "You're the one that told me it might be a baby Bludger, or something."

“What about the stone of life?” Goyle asked. Harry just looked at him blankly. He was far too tired for textbook conversations. He sighed, shook his head and put his head to pillow.

“Goodnight, Greg,” he answered blearily, exhausted. But Goyle was undaunted, and he began to read out loud, albeit slowly.

“Extremely rare, only a few have been found east of the Caucasus Mountains. Always small and highly polished, they are made of cinnabar or serpentine. The largest known vivificus stone was The Heart of Asha. Last seen in the Great Purge, it was used by Pravus to restore himself. Its theft from the Iscadian vault is deemed, by some, to be the turning point of the war.” Goyle looked up from his book and looked into the skeptical eyes of his dorm mate. “Harry, there’s a painting,” he said tapping the pages. Rolling his eyes toward the ceiling and exhaling a large huff, Harry reluctantly slid out of bed to look at the picture. The painting was of a spherical red stone supported by three sharp silver spikes thrusting upward from an ornate gold stand.

“What? That thing?” Harry sneered. “For all I can tell, that could be a tiny marble or a bowling ball.” Just then, a hand reached down and grabbed the object putting its size into perspective. A black onyx ring on one finger, the hand was sickeningly translucent. “Pravus,” Harry thought. A spike skewered one of the sickly fingers and light flashed from the ball between the finger’s companions until the scene went dazzling white and then returned to what Harry first saw. He walked over to his desk and picked up the stone from the dragonhead. Holding it next to the page as Goyle held open the text, the two watched the scene repeat.

“It’s the same,” Goyle whispered.

“No it’s not,” Harry said dismissively. “That... that stone there... it’s... it’s too red. That’s what it is... too red.” Goyle shut the text and levitated it over to his desk.

“Uh huh. Sure,” he said with a tinge of sarcasm, extinguishing the candles above his bed leaving only the candle on Harry’s desk flickering. “Goodnight.”

"I mean," Harry said pacing the floor with the stone in his hands. "My cousin gave me this stone. That's all it is... a polished chunk of rock!" But the book's painting was as vivid as any in Hogwarts and it clearly showed the same polished surface, the same dark grain and glint of ember. And perhaps more importantly, the two stones were identical in size. "Rubbish!" Harry hissed at himself. "Damn Ron for trying to get you into Charms and damn you for listening! You've got me all worked up over nothing. It's just a rock!" He dropped it into the teeth of the dragonhead and threw himself onto his bed. "I'm going to sleep."

"I said goodnight already," answered Goyle grinning. Except for Harry tossing from one side of the bed to the other, there was a long period of silence in their dorm. From downstairs, there was an occasional burst of laughter, faint and distant. The wind was picking up outside and it began to whistle against the windows. Finally, Harry could bear it no more.

"What's a vivificus stone?" he asked sheepishly. Goyle tried not to laugh.

"You're the one in the N.E.W.T. not me," Goyle chided. Harry sat upright and scowled. Menacingly he pointed his right hand at Goyle, narrowed his eyes, and presented the best evil grin he could muster. "Okay, okay," Goyle said holding his hands in the air. "No need to get all uppity. It's the 'life stone', Harry. They say you can bring people back from death, near death, anyway. In History, Professor Binns has been talking about how Pravus used it to stave off the many killing curses he endured."

"But how do they work?" Harry asked, looking back at the stone on his desk.

"That's probably why you don't remember studying about them. It's one of the great mysteries, Harry. Nobody knows." Goyle shrugged his shoulders. "I guess you're right, eh? If you don't know how it works, it is just a rock." Harry looked hard at the stone considering the possibilities and then the pieces of the puzzle that had been floating in his mind began to come together.

"Such a simple spell," he whispered, echoing Dumbledore's words. "But I've yet to realize its full potential." He cast a glance at the staircase leading down to the common room. They were still chatting and laughing.

"Watch the door," he whispered to Goyle as he stood back up and walked over to his desk. Goyle got out of bed and guarded the door as Harry slid the dragonhead and stone to the edge of his desk. He pulled his wand and pointed it at the ball of cinnabar, but then lowered his hand. "This is stupid. Gabriella will kill me if I tell her I melted..." Harry paused, then under his breath he whispered, "Out of bravery, fire." He raised his wand back to the stone, touching it with the wand's holly tip. "And, no, Hermione," he whispered to the air, his lips pressed tight against his teeth, "I haven't thought this through." Harry focused all his being to the center of the cinnabar.

"Incendio!" he called out. A blast of fire erupted, pushing him a step backward, but the connection had been made. Instead of spreading out across the table, the flames seemed to be sucked into the ball. A great whirlwind of flame plummeted into the tiny red ball. When the flames stopped, the ball glowed bright, casting a fiery orange brilliance across the entire room. Even Goyle had to shield his eyes. Then, Harry reached out his hand to grab it.

"Stop!" Goyle yelled. "You'll burn yourself!" But Harry's mind was transfixed on the glowing orb before him and the memory of the textbook painting he'd just seen.

"Out of wisdom, blood," he whispered. He clutched the ball, his mind trying to adjust to the fact that it felt like grabbing a piece of ice. With the stone still in the dragonhead, he turned it, slicing his fingers on the sharp teeth holding it in place. Blood flowed freely from his hand, but was absorbed by the ball like a thirsty sponge. In that instant, all went white, as Harry found himself being pulled, as if by Portkey, into the ball. He tried to let out a scream, but all was silent. Indeed, there was no sound, no motion, no vision, no sensation of any kind. He was in a vast expanse of whiteness... a blank canvass waiting for his next command.

“Like Pravus, can I cure myself?” Harry’s thoughts seemed to radiate from deep within his mind, and somehow he knew the answer was yes. “I can remove the curse... remove the madness.” For a moment his thoughts bent on the cure and the white began to mix with a swirl of black in his mind.

“Stop!” his mind rang out. “Out of love, true power.” The swirling stopped and the mixing black began to fade to gray and then to whiteness. “Where’s the love in curing oneself?” his thoughts called out to the open nothingness. For a long time, Harry’s mind turned the options that lay before it. Finally, his thoughts struck gold.

“Dumbledore!” he breathed, and in that instant he brought to bear his mind, his body, his soul to the healing of the Headmaster. Colours exploded in the whiteness and coalesced before Harry into a vision of the great wizard prone in his bed. It was a snapshot, frozen in time. The wizard was pale and gaunt, a mere skeleton of himself. The moment stood there before Harry’s eyes and somehow he knew he was being asked to continue. “Yes,” his mind called out. “YES!”

There was an explosion of light ripping from Harry’s very core and the colours of the snapshot before him came to life, swirling with vivid green flames into the chest of Dumbledore. The old wizard’s face awoke with astonishment and in that flash of brilliance his eyes and his mind met with Harry’s, and the look of astonishment became one of knowing gratitude. A smile passed across his face, but then the image began to race away, disappearing down a tunnel of darkness. There was a whoosh, as if a great wind extinguished a fire, and all went black.

“Harry!” Goyle called out. For a moment, Harry didn’t know where he was. He opened his eyes to see Goyle kneeling at his side. Harry found himself on his back, underneath his desk, the red stone still clutched tightly in his hand. A bit dizzy, he sat up and looked down as he opened his hand. There was no blood, no cut, no mark of any kind.

“What happened?” he asked groggily. “How long have I been out?” He once again heard the distant laughter from the common room below.

“Out?” Goyle asked. “You touched the stone and just fell to the floor. What’s that... three seconds?”

“That’s not possible,” Harry answered back, suddenly realizing he was very tired. Goyle helped him back to his bed. “I was in there for at least twenty minutes, maybe an hour.”

“In where?” Goyle asked, perplexed.

“In the... the...” A wave of exhaustion broke over Harry, and he faded to sleep.

Harry woke to a flurry of activity in the dormitory. The sun blazed through the window as bags were zipping and trunks slamming. Everyone was getting ready to leave for the holiday.

“Finally,” Dean said with a smile tossing a large duffle onto his bed. “Hey, Ron, he’s awake!” Harry looked over to Ron who was trying to stuff another pair of socks into his already overfilled bag.

“You know,” said Harry, scratching his head and wondering what Ron was doing, “you are going home and you do have clothes there.” Ron turned around almost trying to use his body to hide the bag behind him.

“Yeah, well, I, er... you never know what you’re going to need to wear, right?” He tossed his jacket over the bag and walked over to Harry, who was now sitting up rubbing his face. “Rough day, yesterday. Good to see you got some sleep.” Harry thought back to the evening before. Was it all a dream? He looked over to Goyle’s bed, but everything had been cleared out. Ron looked over too.

“He’s gone,” Ron said, a bit of sadness tingeing his words. “Told us to look out after you, though. What’d he say Dean?” Dean zipped his bag and set it on his bed.

“Let’s see,” Dean began, flopping down on his own bed. “‘Harry had a bit of a fall last night. Make sure he wakes up himself in the morning.’ It’s a bit mysterious if you ask me, but Goyle always was a little

melodramatic, don't you think?" Ron nodded in agreement as Harry stood.

"Well, I'm me," Harry said. "And my stomach is telling me it's time for breakfast. I'll take a quick shower and be back. Can you two wait?" In unison, both Dean and Ron rolled their eyes with impatience, but then nodded their heads.

"Sure," they answered reluctantly. "Ten minutes! That's it!"

When the three finally made it to the Great Hall, they found it buzzing with conversation. Daily Prophets were spread everywhere and everyone was pointing and talking with wild expressions.

"Something's happened," Ron whispered as they stepped in. They were making their way over to the Gryffindor table when Hermione looked up from her paper. There was a throng of students looking over her shoulder, but when she saw Harry and Ron, she folded the paper, pushed the crowd aside and walked over to them.

"She caught two," Hermione said above the din. "Tonks caught two." She grabbed Harry by the arm, pulling him toward the large entrance doors of the Great Hall. Ron followed as Dean chose instead to sit down next to Ginny to get the news.

"Can't we eat first?" Ron called out, but Hermione ignored him, briskly walking out of the Great Hall and into the corridor where they could have more privacy. "I've read it three times, but something's bothering me," she said opening the paper and displaying the front-page news.

Two key Death Eaters were apprehended last night during a midnight raid in a small farmhouse outside of Newcastle. The raid was led by Nymphadora Tonks, a junior Auror at the Ministry of Magic, currently on leave to teach at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Several Ministry members descended on the farmhouse shortly after midnight, based on a tip received by Auror Tonks earlier in the week. None were hurt in the skillful attack that captured Andrew Wythe and Terrence Pendleton, active recruiters for the ever-growing numbers of Death Eaters.

"We've been tracking these two down for some time now," Auror Tonks said. "The wizards of Britain can rest easier now that the two are headed to Azkaban."

When asked about any information concerning the location of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or the missing Hogwarts students, Auror Tonks had no comment.

"It goes on," Hermione said, but that's the gist of it. "I don't know what it is, but..."

"Wythe & Pendleton?" Harry asked, taking the paper from Hermione's hands. Reading a few lines he spoke under his breath. "He said they'd be punished." He looked out across the empty corridor. "They tried to serve him, and he's sent them to Azkaban. If Draco doesn't..."

"What are you talking about, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Voldemort!" Harry snapped making the redhead cringe. "Don't you remember?" Harry asked, recalling the many times the three had examined his connections with the Dark Lord. "These were the two that had Luna." Harry searched his memory. "They brought her to me... him, I mean. He said they'd pay."

"I remember," said Hermione softly. "But why would he give them up willingly?" she asked.

"I don't know, Hermione," Harry answered in frustration. "They were afraid of him; I think he takes some sick pleasure in punishing people for no real reason. How... why anyone would follow such a madman..." The word reverberated in Harry's mind like a peal of thunder. He staggered backward and crumpled against the wall. Hermione knelt down and took his shoulder.

"You'll be fine, Harry," she said with a gentle voice. "We'll find a way to..."

Suddenly the Great Hall erupted into cheers. The sound, even out in the corridor, was deafening. The three friends walked to the entrance

to see Tonks striding in to sit at the head table. Dressed in dark purple robes, she was exuberant. There was a radiance that Harry had never really seen before. She stood at an empty chair next to Remus, waved just briefly, and sat down. The clapping quieted and a handful of students went up to the head table to shake her hand.

“Let’s eat,” Ron said emphatically. “I’m starving.”

“Don’t you want to welcome her back?” Hermione asked. Ron looked at the long line of students and then at the food on the table and chose to sit down at an open space near a large plate of sausages. Hermione sighed. “Well, I guess that answers that.”

Halfway through breakfast, Professor McGonagall stood up from her chair and addressed the students gathered. “I needn’t remind you that the Hogwarts Express departs Hogsmeade at ten o’clock. The carriages will leave the school at nine-thirty. Please have all your belongings with you and be ready to go by then.” She paused looking at the empty chair beside her and bit her lip. “I am sure Professor Dumbledore would wish you all well on your travels. I warn you, however, that you must be exceptionally careful while away from the school.”

“The Headmaster would agree, Professor McGonagall,” a familiar voice resonated from the entrance to the Great Hall. “And be sure to take plenty of socks!” All eyes swung toward the front doors. There was a collective gasp as all saw Professor Dumbledore standing in the archway. Even Professor McGonagall gave out a shudder wondering if, perhaps, she was watching a ghost. With steady steps, and a strong deliberate stride, Professor Dumbledore walked between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables on his way to the front of the Great Hall. He smiled and patted students on the way. As students began to realize that this was no vision, no ghost, but the man himself smiles spread like wildfire across the room. One by one they began to pound the tables in a rhythmic beat. Soon his name was attached to the rhythm.

“Dum-ble-dore! Dum-ble-dore! Dum-ble-dore!”

Professor McGonagall was alabaster white as the Headmaster turned the corner of the head table. As he made the turn, he took his first glance over at the Gryffindor students where Harry now stood cheering his name with the others. There he found a look of joy on Harry's face that had not been present all year. The old wizard smiled broadly and winked at Harry. When he came to stand before Professor McGonagall she was shaking and, unable to withhold her emotions, wrapped her arms around him in a grand hug. The school exploded with deafening cheers. Only a handful of Slytherins sat with their arms crossed. One of them was Draco Malfoy, but Greg Goyle standing at his left continued to howl. Dumbledore shook hands with a few of the other professors and then raised his hands to try to quiet the school down. It was several minutes before he could gain control and even he was taken aback by the outpouring of emotion.

"It has been over a month since I last joined you for breakfast. Forgive me, today, for being a bit late. The staff tells me that the fried toast is particularly good this morning, but I thought perhaps something a bit more festive." Dumbledore clapped his hands and instantly the room was transformed into a holiday postcard. Christmas décor spanned the walls and ceiling, while the tables began to fill with candy, lots of candy. "The peppermint sticks are a personal favorite of mine, although I'm not sure how they taste with sausage."

Without saying another word, Professor Dumbledore sat down next to Professor McGonagall and unwrapped a large peppermint stick. Again, the room cheered. The attention that had minutes earlier been focused on Professor Tonks was now completely transferred to the Headmaster.

"You can quit squeezing my leg now, Hermione," Ron called out in agony.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ron," Hermione squealed. "I... I can't believe it! I just can't believe it! They said he... Oh, it's a miracle!"

"I thought you said he was getting better, Hermione," Ron answered back rubbing his leg. "What's the surprise?" At this, Hermione's eyes

began to find something else to look at, and Harry realized he wasn't the only one she was hiding something from.

"He was almost dead, wasn't he?" Harry asked. The words were direct and to Harry's surprise Hermione gave a direct answer.

"Yes," she replied, anticipating a rebuke that never came. "Professor McGonagall didn't think he'd see Christmas." With this success, Harry considered a follow-up question but remembered that it was he who asked not to be told.

"Well, he's better now," said Harry, his heart lighter than it had been since the summer with Gabriella. He wasn't about to tell anybody about last night. He'd sound like a conceited slob. No, that would be his and Goyle's secret, at least until he was sure it wasn't all a dream. Harry looked over at the Slytherin table to find Malfoy talking heatedly with Pansy Parkinson, but Goyle looking over his way. The Slytherin wore a broad smile then turned to scoop up some more eggs.

Harry, Ron and Hermione finished breakfast and began the trek back up the Gryffindor tower. Many were already making their way down the moving staircases to the carriages waiting in front of the castle. The three had just climbed to the top of the second staircase and were waiting for it to slide into place, when a voice called from the landing on the far side.

"Wotcher, Harry!" It was Tonks, the colour of her hair lighter than it had been downstairs. She called to Hermione and Ron, "Do you two mind if I speak with him for a moment? Just a few pointers before I'm off for the holiday."

"Actually, Professor Tonks," said Hermione, "we're running pretty late. Maybe later you could..."

"It's okay," interrupted Harry. "I've got a couple minutes." Hermione gave Harry a look that held more irritation than seemed reasonable. "Only a minute," Harry answered her expression. Hermione hesitated, clearly wanting to say something. She bit her lip, and then she and Ron stepped off the staircase and Harry rode it as it swung around toward the landing where Tonks was waiting. His friends continued to

ascend to Gryffindor tower as Harry began to walk down the empty corridor toward Tonks' classroom.

"How are you?" he asked. "We were starting to worry." Tonks smiled and put her arm around Harry.

"It's good to see you too!" she said. "I guess I'm more an Auror than a Professor. I knew we had them on the run and I couldn't let go -- not when we were so close." She stopped and turned Harry toward her looking him up and down. "And, how are you? Have you made any more contacts with You-Know-Who?" Surprised by the sudden question, Harry shook his head.

"I've tried to concentrate on school. It's been a bit tough with both you and Snape gone."

"Professor Snape," she said with a smile. "He's fine, Harry. I saw him not two days ago, doing what he does best." It was odd, Harry thought. Her eyes seemed to look through him rather than at him. An eerie feeling crawled up his spine, as she took a few paces to his left, staring at him all the while. "It's not truly appropriate for Professors to give their students any gifts of consequence during the school year. But, I've reviewed the rules and believe this would be appropriate." She handed Harry a small red package with a green bow. Harry began to open it, but Tonks stopped him. "No. Not here. At Christmas Harry," she said quietly. "Wait until Christmas."

"Er, thanks, Tonks. Sorry, but I didn't..."

"Don't worry about it," she said. There was an awkward moment of silence.

"Well, I better get going," said Harry, turning toward the door. "They'll be leaving soon." Tonks grabbed his arm.

"Wait," she said, still smiling -- a bit too broadly, Harry thought. "I just wanted to know if you'll be staying here for the holiday. Or are you heading off to Grimmauld Place? Maybe Privet Drive and Gabriella?"

"I know I've never been home for the holidays before, but..." He looked back down the empty corridor. It looked, somehow, darker. Something didn't feel right, but Harry didn't know why. "Really, Tonks, I need to go."

"Sure thing, Harry," she said, continuing to smile broadly. "I'll check with Hermione. You'll let her know won't you?" Harry started back to the staircases leaving Tonks standing in the corridor alone.

"Hermione knows everything, Tonks!" he called back, and started jogging to catch up with his companions.

While they packed, he mentioned his conversation with Tonks to Ron and Hermione. Hermione furled her brow, but then a sly smile crossed her face.

"I'll give Tonks the information she needs," said Hermione with satisfaction.

Harry was oblivious to anything she said. The thought of returning to Little Whinging quickened his pulse. What would happen while he was there? Even Harry was unclear. There was a lot to talk about with Gabriella. Zipping his travel case, his innards lurched at the prospect of telling her the truth, wondering what her reaction might be. The feeling stayed with him as the three friends loaded up their gear in one of the Threstral driven carriages. With his hand, Ron stroked the flank of one of the creatures he couldn't see.

"I can't believe I rode one of these things to London," he whispered. "I hope it's a long time before I can ever see one," he said grimly. Just then Hagrid called out, instructing all the students to hop in the carriages. He stepped over to Harry and ruffled his hair.

"You take care, now, eh?" he said with a hint of concern. "I'll be thinking of yeh. Yer Christmas present is already waitin' fer yeh when yeh get there. I'm not much at wrappin' presents and all, but it's got a nice bow." He smiled and hugged Harry. "Be careful, and be happy."

When they arrived at the train station there was, once again, an awkward moment as Ron and Hermione had to go to the prefect's carriage.

"Go on," Harry said, looking up and down the length of the train. "Catch up with me when you can." Hermione and Ron jumped onto the train, but Harry hesitated. Something felt wrong, but he wasn't sure why. His left thumb made its way to his right forearm and rubbed it gently, a habit that he'd found hard to break, especially lately. Somehow he felt as if he was being watched.

"Worried, Potter?" a voice drawled from behind him. Harry spun to see Malfoy flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. The three approached Harry, each carrying their bags over their shoulders. "Here Crabbe," Malfoy ordered. "Take my bag in... and make sure I have a seat by the window." Crabbe nodded taking Malfoy's pack, but Goyle remained. Malfoy just rolled his eyes. "Oh, please, Goyle," the blonde sneered. "Don't tell me -- you think you need to protect me from Potter. Go on with Crabbe, I'll follow in a minute." Goyle stood firm and Malfoy sighed. "You think I'm going to attack, Potter?" An evil grin crossed Malfoy's face as he glanced about, noting the absence of any professors in the immediate vicinity. "Well, now that you mention it... it's not such a bad idea."

"Go on Greg," said Harry, drawing his wand. "I think Malfoy here is ready to give me an apology."

"You wish," Malfoy sneered. Nonetheless, Goyle climbed the steps of the carriage and Harry walked with Malfoy toward the front of the train. "I knew Gryffindor would ruin him, Potter," Malfoy said rolling his eyes, "but I didn't realize how much. Merlin, Parvati Patil? How could you let it happen?" Harry just laughed.

"It's love, Draco," Harry said as the glint in his eyes turned to a glare.

"And you thing I don't know what it means to love, right Harry?" Malfoy asked, his words dripping with sarcasm. "Well... maybe you're right. But if you're such an expert at it, Harry, tell me... what is love?" For a moment, Harry actually pondered the question as the last students mounted the train.

“An unconditional commitment for the betterment of others. It means sacrifice, Draco, more sacrifice than you’d ever be capable of giving of yourself.”

“Very... Ministerial of you, Harry. At least, that’s how it reads in the Daily Prophet. But all life’s real action takes place in the dark corners of this world, Harry -- the exchange of Galleons for favors. Wizards all talk of self-sacrifice and then they all line their pockets with gold when no one’s looking.”

“Look, you didn’t bring me out here to...”

“The two Death Eaters were caught near Newcastle,” Malfoy cut in with a lowered voice. “Newcastle’s just south of here.”

“I know where Newcastle is, Draco.”

“They’ve been waiting for you to come to him, Harry. The Death Eaters haven’t been anywhere near Hogwarts. Those two were meant to be caught, or...” Malfoy dropped his voice even lower, “they were spies; an advanced guard scouting a way to come and take you, Harry. Do you understand?”

“But, how do you...”

“Gentlemen.” They both turned to find Professor Dumbledore, but a few paces behind them.

“Sir,” they said in unison surprised by the sight.

“Mr. Malfoy, I was wondering if I might have a word with Mr. Potter.”

“Yes, sir,” Malfoy said, “Merry Christmas, sir.” Harry heard the emphasis on the word ‘Christmas’, but had no idea what it meant.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Malfoy,” Dumbledore said kindly as Malfoy walked back to the train’s entrance. “Extraordinary, Harry,” he whispered watching Malfoy climb the stairs.

“Really, sir, we were just...” Harry began, but Dumbledore raised his hand to stop him.

The whistle blew on the train announcing last call. Dumbledore walked Harry back to the train’s entrance. The old wizard began a story, as he put it, “about a truly remarkable Muggle.”

“When Michelangelo Buonarroti painted the Sistine Chapel, he built a scaffold that took him up to the ceiling. He climbed to the top and would paint one small square at a time. Finishing one patch of paint, he would climb down, move the scaffolding and begin again. If you were to climb to the top with him, you’d look at his work and say ‘My you’ve painted a wonderful ear,’ or admire perhaps the mixture of colour in and eye, but no more. Not until you returned to the floor and saw the complete fresco would you truly understand his genius. Not until you took on the entire ceiling would you understand the breadth of what he had accomplished.” They paused at the steps into the train. “You’re too close, I think, to see your own work, Harry. When I fell ill, Cho Chang was struggling to regain her strength. With your help she walks unassisted onto the very train that nearly cost her her life. Her brother James would have killed Mr. Malfoy were it not for you, and yet today I see James playing wizard chess with a first year from Slytherin; and now Draco exchanging pleasantries with you. Mr. Goyle was well on his way to dropping out of school, a path that would have surely meant his destruction. And yet, I hear he’ll be testing for the Charms N.E.W.T. with high expectations of passing. Small miracles in their own right, Harry. But the mural you’re creating is quite astounding.” There was a slight pause. “Please come back and finish it.”

“If I can Professor,” Harry said solemnly. “Depending on my... mental state and all.” Professor Dumbledore took Harry by the arm and looked at him closely.

“As you might imagine, I’ve only just learned of this new difficulty, Harry. Don’t worry. You’ll be fine, son. I promise you that.” His blue eyes were fixed, strong and earnest. In those eyes, Harry saw confidence and his anxiety softened. The train started to pull away and Harry jumped on the first step. “Harry!” the wizard called him back. Harry turned to see what Dumbledore wanted. “Thank you.”

The whistle blew and the train began to puff its way forward. Closing the glass door, Harry watched as Dumbledore, and then the town of Hogsmeade faded from sight.

Suddenly two hands gently wrapped around Harry's eyes. "Come on Cho, I think I'd know..." but then a familiar scent drifted to fill his nostrils. His heart began to race as perspiration instantly flashed across his whole body. Reaching for the hands he spun around. "Gabriella!"

Chapter 43 - Holiday Surprise

All the students had found their way to their carriages, leaving the corridor leading down the train empty; they were alone. Harry saw her there before him and for an instant he lost all sense of purpose and direction. Her face wore the familiar smile that always melted his heart and her eyes were dancing with a twinkle that could only be Gabriella's. How long had he waited to be with her again? How many hours had he stayed up at night thinking only of this moment? Suddenly, he realized he was utterly and completely exposing himself to attack. Still holding her wrists, his hands tightened and his eyes narrowed. He looked hard trying to see through the veneer.

"The eyes," he thought to himself. He gazed intently at the black pools beckoning him forward. They were true, but still he questioned his senses.

"What magic is this?" his voice quavered. "Who are you?"

"Harry, it's me, Gabriella."

"Liar!" he screamed out. He let go of one of her wrists and withdrew his wand. "Tell me your name! Show your self!"

"My true self?" she said mischievously. Harry stood frozen, every fiber ready to bring this imposter down. "Don't be silly," she said with a twinkle in her eye. In that instant, Harry relaxed.

"Gabriella?" he asked softly.

In a blur she spun, her wrist easily breaking free of Harry's grasp. Before he could respond, she turned and threw her leg high into the air, her foot striking Harry's wand and sending it flying down the corridor. Without hesitation Harry raised his right hand and a blast of white light struck the girl in the chest sending her into the wall. She crumpled to the ground coughing.

"I haven't seen that one," she gasped, rubbing her collar bone. "Mama said you were special."

“Gabriella?” In a flash it became clear. There was only one person in this world Harry knew capable of removing his wand by hand and she’d done it without harming him in any way. Immediately he fell to her side, regretting every word that had come from his mouth. “I’m sorry... I’m so, so sorry... Are you okay?”

“Harry,” she gasped, bringing him closer. Then she whispered seductively into his ear, “when you bend over like this... you put yourself... at the disadvantage.” In an instant, she had his shoulder with her hand, her thumb driving forward and striking a nerve, sending waves of pain into Harry’s body. She swung her leg around his waist and pushed him down against the floor. He was unable to move his arm... completely helpless. She let go and pressed her entire body against his kissing him hard. “God, I’ve missed you,” she said breathlessly. Immediately, he responded wrapping his arms tight around her waist and pulling her close.

“Uh-hum,” a voice coughed from the corridor. “Could you two bring that in here?” It was Cho Chang, a knowing grin on her face. She was standing at the door of the nearest carriage, beckoning them inside.

“Cho?” Harry questioned from the floor, his back against the wall. Gabriella took to her feet and pulled Harry up by his shirt with both her hands.

“Some wizard you are, Potter,” said Cho. “Taken down by a girl no less. Here, you may need this later.” She handed him his wand as both he and Gabriella entered the empty carriage. “I have to get back to the prefect’s meeting so I only have a few minutes.” She sat down across from Harry and Gabriella. Harry was completely dumbfounded, a perplexed expression on his face. “You know Harry, you don’t look well,” she snickered. Harry looked at Cho, and then to Gabriella, and back again. He was speechless. Finally, Cho explained.

“One night, a few weeks ago, I sent an owl off with a post. I addressed it to Harry’s Gabriella.” Cho looked at Harry and patted his leg. “I was being stupid, Harry. I know that now.”

"Well, imagine my surprise when it came to me," said Gabriella. A look of fear spread across Harry's eyes. "You are an incurable criminal," she said, pinching his arm hard. "Still, I wrote her back..."

"... and we've been writing ever since," added Cho. She shifted in her seat, stood, and then gave Gabriella a hug. "I wondered what sort of Muggle would capture my Harry's heart so completely. Hah!" Cho laughed, winking at Gabriella and stepping out into the corridor. "I've placed a locking charm on the outside of your door that not even Hermione Granger could open. You'd best keep an eye out for the trolley when it comes time to eat. But until then, you two are all alone." Cho winked and waived her fingers, closing the door behind her. The second the door closed, Gabriella wrapped her arms around Harry's neck and squeezed him tight.

"Thank goodness you're okay," she whispered. "Let me see." She reached for his shirt.

"See what?" Harry asked, still completely lost and totally un-centered.

"Where it pierced you," she answered, but still he was flummoxed. "The broom!" she said exasperated as she unbuttoned his shirt revealing his bare chest and abdomen. "Cho said you almost died and you didn't say a word!"

"I couldn't say, Gab. How could I? Pierced by a broom. What would you think? I tripped sweeping the floor?" She pulled his shirt back exposing the thin, red outline of the six-inch scar that still had not quite healed completely. Gabriella let out a gasp, holding one hand to her mouth while the other touched the scar.

"This should be healed by now!" she exclaimed, a bit of an over reaction in Harry's mind. After all, it was nearly healed.

"Well," he began, "I need to go back next summer and..."

"Next summer!" she cut in with even more concern. "What type of Healers do you have at that school of yours, anyway?" Her eyes flashed with anger and her lips went thin. The expression only lasted for a moment.

“Well, it wasn’t healed at the school, really. They worked on me at...”

“I’ve been a fool. I can’t do this any longer,” she said quietly. She kissed his neck, and then his chest, and then her lips touched the remnants of the scar. Harry squirmed a bit, trying to keep his right leg from twitching. She whispered something Harry couldn’t hear, then placed both her hands where Harry had been skewered. At first the sensation was warm and Harry began to relax. Slowly the warmth turned cold, uncomfortably cold. Harry tried to move, but Gabriella wouldn’t let him. It felt as if his flesh was turning to ice and it was spreading from her fingers out across his entire body. He was about to forcibly push her away, when she let go. The warmth rushed back and Harry looked down. The scar was gone.

“There, that’s better,” she said with a look of satisfaction on her face, and then her lips curled down. “But there’s something else wrong with your liver.” Her eyes flickered with fear as she held his hands. “Oh, Harry, Cho was right. You almost died.”

Harry’s eyes grew wide. He looked to the door, contemplating Cho’s last words, trying to put these new pieces together.

“You... you’re...” he stammered. “Are you?” he breathed. Gabriella smiled and wrapped her arms around him again.

“Don’t be silly,” she whispered. “Would Cho bring me here if I weren’t?” Hearing these words, Harry pulled back.

“Why... why didn’t you tell me?” he snapped.

“And why didn’t you tell me?” she fired back. “If you had died...” Her eyes were angry, and then sorrowful. She folded her arms, crossed her legs, and sat in the corner looking out the window. Outside, the sun blared bright against the white of the snow covering the earth. As Harry gazed at Gabriella’s silhouette against the lighted window, her face radiated with a brilliance and beauty that melted his heart. He moved over, sat at her side, and placed his hand on her arm.

"I missed you, too," he whispered tilting his head gently against hers. A thin smile moved across Gabriella's face as she unfolded her arms. Harry smiled back, reaching down to button up his shirt. Gabriella stopped the motion, taking his hand in hers.

"Don't be silly," she said, a twinkle flashing in her black eyes. She leaned over and kissed his lips. "We have things to do." Harry's heart began to pound as he pulled her tight.

Over two hours had passed before the trolley came by, offering food for the passengers. In that time, Harry had done his best to tell her everything. He spoke of his birth and of Voldemort, of how he came to live with the Dursleys, and finally of how he first learned that he was a wizard and came to Hogwarts. He had never spoken of the prophecy with anyone, although Ron and Hermione may have guessed it, and he would not share that with Gabriella. He did warn her, however, that she was in danger by being his girlfriend.

"Is that what I am, Harry?" she asked, taking a bite of sandwich and wiping the edge of her mouth with a white napkin. "Because I don't remember you asking me." There was the faintest hint of a smile on her face as she looked at him from the corner of her eye. Harry felt his tongue disappear somewhere down his throat as he tried to croak a response.

"Well, I assumed that..."

"Oh that's classic!" she snapped, seeming to enjoy the moment. "I assumed," she mocked in her best Potter voice. "Let's get something straight right now. My name is Gabriella Arasha Darbinyan and no boy assumes anything where I am concerned. If you have plans for me in your life, Mr. Potter, you'd best ask straight away." She set her hands together in her lap, her legs crossed, waiting for an answer. For the smallest of moments, Harry hesitated and then a smile crossed his face. Setting his sandwich down, he reached out and took her hand.

"Ms. Darbinyan," he said, mustering his best formal voice. "Would you do me the honor of being my girlfriend?"

"Do you know what it means if I say yes?" she asked coyly. "You won't be running around gallivanting with every girl in that school of yours. And that includes the likes of Cho Chang! I don't care how wonderful she is."

"I know."

"Do you?" she asked sternly.

"I do."

"Then... yes," answered Gabriella. "I will be your girlfriend and we are officially a couple." She kissed him gently, then paused. "By the way, I invited Cho over for the holiday."

"You what?" Harry called out. There was a knock on the door and Harry held his finger up to his lips to silence Gabriella.

"Alohomora!" It was Hermione trying to open the door, but it would not move. "Patefacio!" she called out using a spell Harry had not heard before. Still the door remained firm.

"Bloody hell!" Ron yelled out. "That's the last carriage. He's been taken, Hermione! I know it. We've got to tell..." Shirtless, Harry slid open the door, only poking his head out. Looking down the corridor he saw two students pass into a carriage leaving the corridor empty except for Ron and Hermione.

"Looking for something?" Harry asked, a grin on his face.

"Harry!" Ron called out heading for the door to push it open. "What have you been... Hey, open the door." Harry just smiled.

"Bit busy, Ron," Harry said, holding the door tight. "Maybe you two could stop by later. Don't you have some sort of prefect thingy to do?"

"What happened to your hair?" Hermione asked. Harry's head was a mess even on the best of days, but now it was a dreadful disaster. "And what's this?" she asked pointing to a red-blue bruise on his neck. She tried to peak about the door and her eyes narrowed. "Harry

Potter... you.... Do you know what would happen if a professor found out?"

"And are you going to track one down?" Harry asked with a tinge of rancor in his voice. Hermione just scowled.

"Come on Ron. Let's go."

Ron was confused, and crushingly curious to see behind the door. "But..."

"Come on. Can't you see he's busy?" Hermione grabbed Ron's arm and yanked him from the door.

"Busy doin' what?" Ron asked walking backwards down the corridor. Harry had to laugh as he closed the door and turned to see Gabriella looking out the window. The sun was now low on the horizon and began to stream into the carriage. He stood there, transfixed at the girl who had captured his soul. He pulled on his shirt and ran his fingers through his hair. When she turned to face him, her eyes were red, and tears were falling down her cheeks. Still, she smiled, and spoke without the slightest waver in her voice.

"Ron and Hermione... your friends... your best friends. Cho told me that the three of you are inseparable. It was Ron that I met in London, right?" she asked. Harry nodded his head and sat down next to her.

"Only you're wrong on one account, Gabriella. You are my best friend," he said with a sense of satisfaction in his phrasing. But, Gabriella did not respond as he expected.

"Do you think, Harry?" she asked looking at the sun skimming through the trees, flashing light and dark into their carriage. "Cho says you've all known each other since you arrived at Hogwarts over five years ago. That's a long time to stay friends. A test of time." She wiped the tears from her face. "Each day you're away from me, I feel I'm going to lose you."

“But you don’t have to stay away! Come with me to Hogwarts!” said Harry, setting on his own vision of the future. “You’d be a Gryffindor, I know you would!” Gabriella smiled and shook her head.

“That will never happen, Harry.” She took a deep breath as if steeling herself for a great effort. Mustering courage from deep within, she turned and looked at her boyfriend’s green eyes. “For an hour we spoke of your family... your history. You think you know mine? Joy at the ocean, dreaming of the sunsets on the Mediterranean?” Not knowing what to say, Harry simply shrugged and nodded. “When I look at the sunset and cry, it is not that I am homesick. It is that I miss my brother.” Tears began to well up in her eyes again and she turned to look out the carriage window. The lowering sun flickered through the trees like an old film flashing across her eyes.

“You’re brother?” Harry asked; she had never mentioned having a brother before. Gabriella took another deep breath and tried to gather herself, but her hand began to tremble and Harry took it into his own.

“Harry,” she breathed. “When I tell you... please, don’t make excuses. Just... just go to join your friends. I’ll understand.”

“Tell me what?” Harry asked, his voice pitching higher. She kissed his hand and tried to muster a smile, but it failed miserably.

“My father is a wizard,” she began, trying to steady her voice. “Quite accomplished as an Astronomer and in the Healing Charms, he has lectured around the world. In my country wizards and witches start their instruction earlier than here, often before the age of six depending on when the child begins to show signs of their skill. There is a small school outside of Tripoli, not the University of Balamand, but Al Bsahri, where my father was a professor and where wizards were taught the art and science of magic. Wizards, that is, but not witches. In Lebanon, witches are denied access to wands and formal training and forced to learn their skills at home. Fortunately for me, my mother was quite gifted in certain ways, although she is not what my people would call a witch.” There was a brief flicker of a smile on Gabriella’s face that quickly faded. “Mama comes from a different line.” Her breathing began to quicken and her body tensed.

“My brother, Antreas, was three years my elder, but he showed no magical ability at all. When he was eleven, it became clear that he was a... a...” she searched for the translation.

“A Squib.”

“Yes, a Squib,” Gabriella continued, a distaste for the word apparent on her face. “It was a great disappointment to my father, although he loved us all dearly. Antreas continued to attend school with Muggles, but when I was nine I started showing strong signs of the gift. My father insisted that the rules be changed at Al Bsahri, that I might attend, but I refused to leave my brother. If my mother was content without such training, then so too would I. I would follow my mother’s path. But when my brother graduated, my father convinced the professors and me to join him at Al Bsahri and, to my eternal regret, I did. For years I had practiced the martial arts and I found the movement and flicks of a wand quite similar. I picked the skills up quickly and was soon surpassing many of my male classmates. I endured endless jeers for being the only girl at the school, accused of receiving special treatment because my father was close friends with the Headmaster. They were all so smug, so superior. Often, I would think to leave, but when I would see my father... so proud.... At night he would beam and go on about all that I had accomplished, while my brother, who still lived with us, would sit silently enduring the occasional snipes that Papa would send his way.”

“Each day, Antreas would go to work at the docks. ‘Soon, I’ll have enough money to buy my own house,’ he would say. ‘A grand villa by the ocean! You’ll come to dinner, and together we will watch the sun cool its fires in the sea.’” Gabriella stopped and forced herself to draw in a deep breath. “When he returned home, instead of listening to his dreams, my father would continue to gush stories of me from school.” Her entire body started trembling and Harry pulled her close to his. “I... I began to think myself special... superior to Muggles... better than my brother and before I realized it, I began to laugh when my father would pull Antreas down. I would join the jokes and jeers. Soon our dinners ended with Mama calling, ‘Enough!’ and leaving the table.” Tears were flowing freely down her face, but her voice remained steady and strong. Clearly enduring a great pain, she continued.

“One day... my birthday... Papa took me to buy my first broom. I had grown to love Quidditch, but had never flown before. ‘That’s no excuse,’ Papa said. ‘You’ll be Al Bsatiri’s Chaser by year’s end; wait and see. You have all the ingredients Gabriella: focus, determination and a willingness to attack all the challenges before you.’” Imitating her father’s voice, her eyes brightened for a moment, but then they fell as she looked down at her hands.

“We were away shopping at a magical village outside Tripoli, when Antreas thought to bring me his gift in person. He came to visit the school alone for the first time. What he found was an abomination. When Papa would leave the school to lecture, one of the professors, the Headmaster, my father’s friend would hold secret meetings. He had begun teaching select students the Dark Arts... the Unforgivable Curses, and the secrets of immortality.

On this day, in Papa’s absence, he had gathered many of the students for a special ceremonial sacrifice. Antreas knew nothing of my whereabouts and searched the school until he unwittingly stumbled across the assembled brethren. He watched in horror as they tied an old woman to an altar for their dark ends. As they drew their knives, Antreas screamed for them to stop. They thought he was a Muggle that had somehow passed through their magical shields and one of the young wizards jeered at him for being where he should not. He turned to run, but they pulled him back with their magic. He tried to scream for help, but they silenced him with their wands. They floated him high above their altar and teased him mercilessly. Finally, they lashed him next to the old woman, and on that stone table they plunged their daggers into them both.”

Gabriella’s jaw was set firm, her eyes awash in a mist of tears, and her breath shallow and rhythmic. For a moment Harry thought of Cedric and how he died suddenly without reason. How much more horrifying was this? How much more cruel?

“I understand,” he whispered. In a flash, Gabriella spun and held his face in her right hand looking into his eyes, her own on fire. The look was frightening.

"You understand nothing!" she hissed. Realizing her own movement, she dropped her hand, crumpled into his arms, and began to sob. Some moments passed before she could speak again, the sound of the train rumbling over the tracks and the setting sun their only company.

"I have two special gifts, Harry. One handed down through the generations of my father's line -- an ability to heal. I see signs, strong signs, of the same gift in you, Harry." She tried to muster a smile as she kissed Harry on the cheek. "I have seen it... in here." She placed her hands over his heart, and then let out a long, slow breath. "My other gift was handed down through the generations of my mother's line -- an ability to sense the thoughts of others. Both my parents are far more gifted than me. I can heal simple wounds without the use of a wand, and so far have learned to sense the feelings of others. I can, for example, tell when someone is lying to me." She straightened on the bench, taking another deep breath, and wiped her face dry.

"They tried to make it look as if he'd been attacked by Muggles. Antreas' body was found on the roadside, his money gone. The papers said it was roadside bandits and Papa cursed Muggles everywhere. He bemoaned that Antreas was unable to protect himself with magic and swore to avenge his death. The happiness that imbued my father's soul was supplanted by hatred. On that day, when we returned to find Antreas dead, I not only lost my brother... I lost my father." The colour of Gabriella's dark brown skin began to fade and her face seemed almost ghostlike. She suddenly looked very ill.

"At school I heard the whisperings and some days later overheard a student mention my brother's name. I got him alone in a classroom and questioned him. He lied, of course, but his thoughts betrayed him. One-by-one, I learned their names and what they had each done. I learned the truth of their evil meeting and how each had a hand in killing my brother." Gabriella began to squeeze Harry's hand as she looked into nothingness across the carriage. "I cursed their magic; I cursed wizards of any kind."

"Honestly, Gabriella," said Harry, trying to reassure her that he understood her hatred of dark wizards and that he would always stay

at her side, "I understand. I'm not going anywhere." She stared at him blankly shaking her head at his ignorance and stroking his face with her trembling hand.

"When I discovered that my father's best friend, the Headmaster, was their leader... when I discovered that he had brought the old woman to Al Bsahri for the ceremony... when I discovered that it was he who gave the word that my brother's blood should be spilt at the altar..." Gabriella began to squeeze Harry's arm. Her voice became low, speaking in barely more than a whisper, "I... I went to him, to his office surrounded by evil magic to protect him from his enemies. And though I was there to kill, he thought I was there to cry." Her dead eyes looked up at Harry. "After all, that's what girls do, isn't it?" Harry said nothing.

"The beast called my name as I passed through his door, and he opened his arms wide pulling me into a hug I had once loved and now despised. He had the nerve to apologize... to apologize for what the Muggles had done. He was my father's friend!" she screamed with hatred. "All his evil magic protected him from hexes and spells, but not these." She held out her hands and squeezed. "He tried to utter a spell, but I crushed his voice box before he had the chance. I watched his eyes roll up in his head as the fear roiled out of his mind in a final plea for mercy. 'What mercy did you show Antreas?' I spat in his face." Gabriella spat across the room, her hands in fists, white and shaking as if reliving the moment. Cold shivers plummeted down Harry's spine.

"A dark plague fell on Al Bsahri the next day, sweeping through the school. One-by-one, as the moon waned, the fifteen students that revealed their secrets to me fell dead for no reason." She swallowed hard, her face absent of expression, her breathing shallow and quick. "It wasn't me, Harry, though I wish even now it had been. Perhaps I willed them dead, or perhaps..." She sat straight, pulling herself away from Harry. "No matter... it was for Antreas."

For a moment Harry stood in horror, not sure what to do. He glanced to the door, back to Gabriella, to the door, and Gabriella. Her hands were still shaking violently. There was an overwhelming urge to leave, but a more overwhelming urge to stay. Last year, at the Ministry, he

would have killed Bellatrix if he'd had it in him. Harry reached out and took her fists, bringing them down to her lap. He held her tight. There were no tears left in her eyes now and, as he held her close, the quickness of her breaths began to slow. Soon, she relaxed in his arms. Her head against his chest, she finished her story.

"Nobody knows what I did, Harry. Except maybe Mama, who seems to know everything; but she has never said a word to me. After the deaths, they closed the school. Papa wanted me to attend Beauxbatons, but I swore I'd never raise a wand again, never use my gifts again. Finally, the job at Pensley College came available and, for me, Papa put his own wand away and brought us to Little Whinging to be safe... to live as Muggles, and leave the Wizarding world behind forever. I never dreamed... why did you have to be a wizard?" She squeezed him in her arms, but then let go. Without saying a word, she kissed him gently on the cheek and turned to look out the window. There, she waited for him to leave.

Harry's mind began to spin. Did she want him to leave? He was a wizard after all and she just said she hated wizards. But then, why come here? Why now? His urge to hold her in his arms was strong, but a vigilante, a murderer? He thought of Bellatrix Lestrange and how he wished he'd been able to accomplish what Gabriella had. She had done something Harry was incapable of. But was that a good thing? Draco would think it a sign of strength, but Dumbledore would see it as a weakness. It would be a dark shadow that followed them everywhere.

Harry's mind turned to the attacks led by Voldemort. Even now, she was at risk by being with him. Once again he looked at the door, only this time he stood, his back toward Gabriella. He held the door's handle in his hand and turned to look at her one last time. Her dark black hair flowed down to her waist. "The eyes," he whispered to himself. He walked over to her, knelt on one knee and gently touched her shoulder. "Gabriella, please look at me," he asked.

She turned from the window and faced Harry. A deep sadness was set upon her face. Harry had never seen her look so weak and vulnerable. For a long while he gazed into her black eyes not saying a word and then a gentle smile broke upon his face. He had never felt

her presence in his mind, but now the time had come. "Use your gift, Gabriella," he whispered. Her eyes looked into each of his, one then the other, back and forth, hesitant to proceed. "Go on," he said gently. "What does my heart say?" She took her hands in his and he felt his mind opening up. Memories flashed across his consciousness as he beckoned her forward, deeper into the emotions of his soul. There she saw it and, almost in disbelief, she dwelt. He was patient, letting her hold it in her own thoughts, in her own soul, and then she let go of his mind and looked into his eyes, a smile spreading across her own face. "I love you," he whispered. "I always have."

She reached out, wrapped her arms about his neck, and together they fell to the floor. "I love you too," she breathed, looking down on him, a glow of happiness in her very being. "I knew you were the one," she whispered.

"The one?" Harry asked. There was a thud at the door.

"Leave him alone, Ron!" Hermione said in a subdued voice from outside in the corridor.

"Something's wrong," Ron shot back. "I know it!" Hermione huffed, but Ron was undaunted. Pounding on the door, he called out, "Harry! Open this door!" Gabriella and Harry gathered themselves as Ron continued to pound. They both stood and Harry slid open the door from the inside, again only sticking his head through. There was a bit of a crowd that had gathered to see what all the yelling was about.

"Are you two done prefecting?" asked Harry sarcastically.

"Harry, I tried..." Hermione began.

"What's going on, Harry?" Ron shot off trying to see past him into the carriage. "Potter, I'm not leaving until you..." Harry slid open the door.

"We've been waiting for you guys to stop by," Harry chided. "Where have you been?" Cautiously, Ron entered the carriage followed by Hermione. "I believe you two have met already," he said to Ron. "Gabriella, you remember Ron, don't you?" Gabriella smiled taking Ron's hand gently in her own.

"Yes. You know, you look very much like your brothers, Fred and George. Fred's a bit sweet and sour though, isn't he? Where's your sister, Ginny?" Ron was dumbstruck.

"She's, er... up at the, erm..."

"Hermione," Harry cut in, "this is my girlfriend, Gabriella. I think you two will find you have a lot in common." Hermione smiled as she shook Gabriella's hand.

"I'm so glad we've finally had a chance to meet," Hermione began. "I'd like to say Harry's told us so much about you, but he's been absolutely dreadful. All we know is that you're the only person who can make him smile at school, and you're not even there." Hermione motioned to Ron to put his wand away. "Have you and Harry had enough time to talk?"

"Yes," said Gabriella, her eyes twinkling, "we've told each other quite a lot over the past few hours."

"Told him what?" Ron asked, still completely flummoxed.

"Gabriella isn't a Muggle, Ron," Harry answered. Ron seemed to take this in with a knowing expression.

"Well, that makes it a bit easier then. Don't it, mate?" Ron asked as if he'd single handedly put the whole thing together in his mind. "I mean, no more secrets and all."

"No more secrets," Harry whispered, taking Gabriella's hand in his, a gentle smile on his face. There was the briefest silence as Gabriella looked into Harry's eyes.

"So," Hermione began, "Harry did say you've just come from Lebanon. It sounds fantastic! What's it like there?" Before long, Gabriella was talking about all the good things in her home country -- the history and architecture, the markets and people, the customs and way of life. It was a tapestry of colour and joy that was her childhood, and she was eager to share it with others. After some time, the subject of the

conversation became Harry. Hermione and Gabriella started laughing, sharing stories of his less memorable exploits. The laughter became a little much and Harry excused himself to go use the restroom.

Passing a carriage with an open door he found Patrick O'Riley sitting with James Chang and his sister Cho. Harry stopped and looked in.

"Hey, Harry!" said James happily. "Have a Merry Christmas!"

"Thanks, James. Erm, you too." Harry's brow furrowed as he looked at Patrick. Seeing the quizzical look, Patrick answered.

"James asked me to spend the holiday at their house," said Pat with a shining smile, and Harry smiled back.

"An amazing family, the Changs," said Harry warmly. "Truly amazing." He motioned his finger to Cho, beckoning her to join him out in the corridor. As she left the carriage, he slid the door shut and kissed her on the cheek. "And you're the most amazing of all. Thank you." Cho held Harry's shoulders, then gave him a hug.

"Everybody needs Harry Potter," she said kindly. "But does anybody ever ask what Harry needs?" She took him by the hand. "I saw it in your eyes and read it in her letter. What does anybody ever really need, Harry?" She ran her fingers through his hair and took hold of the silver earring hidden behind his locks. "She wears the same glint of silver." Reaching up to kiss his cheek, she whispered, "Merry Christmas, Harry."

Returning to her carriage, Cho slid the door shut behind her, and Harry started back down the corridor. They would be at King's Cross soon and his life had just taken a dramatic turn. For the first time in months the fear of what was to come had ebbed away. He could hear Ron, Hermione and Gabriella laughing as he drew near.

"Perhaps," he thought, "love might be enough."

Chapter 44 - The Green Flame

If this were heaven, he would gladly let Voldemort take him right now. The air was filled with the smell of fresh baked bread, cookies, and cakes. Cinnamon and nutmeg filled Harry's senses with hints of garlic and onion from his earlier breakfast. He had already stuffed himself with fried eggs, honey dipped ham, and scallioned potatocakes smothered in a cheese sauce made by the gods, when Soseh pushed half a loaf of sliced banana bread in front of him. It was toasted and spread with whipped honey butter. He couldn't ever remember eating this much, certainly not during the last few months at Hogwarts.

"Go on, Harry," Soseh coaxed, "one more bite. Gabriella was right, you're wasting away!" She set a jar of homemade preserves and handed him a spoon.

It was true that Soseh's mind seemed a bit spotty. When he came through the door this morning she had forgotten his name and, as he passed through the entryway, she neglected to close the front door. Her cooking skills, however, were dead on, and she was still as kind and gentle as she ever was. Her eyes glowed brightly and Harry couldn't help but take the jar of preserves, scoop a large dollop, and spread another slice of banana bread.

"Good... good!" she beamed. "We'll have you among the living in no time! Walking with the dead is no fun at all; is it, Harry?" The words were out of place and he looked at Gabriella whose eyes showed a pang of sorrow. He wondered what perception or memory Soseh was sensing.

After Harry ate to the point of bursting, the couple bundled up and took to Privet Drive for a walk. The streets were free from snow, though a few drifts still remained in shady areas. It was a crystal clear morning, cool and crisp, and their breaths billowed as they spoke. Across the street, the empty Dursley home stood barren of decoration. They were all asleep when Harry arrived home last night and they left before the sun rose in the morning. He heard their hushed whispers until they finally drove away. The only sign that they left behind was a small red envelope that Dudley had slipped under his door. "Merry

Christmas, Harry" was scribbled on the outside, and inside was a gift certificate -- twenty pounds towards a purchase at Sunshine Sports. Harry smiled wondering how Dudley would like the box of chocolate frogs he slipped into his suitcase. Then his thoughts slipped back to his summer job and their walk's destination; he definitely wanted to see how Duncan and Emma were doing.

"I'm sorry Papa couldn't be here to greet you, Harry," said Gabriella, breaking Harry's train of thought as they walked along. "He had a conference this weekend, but promised to be back Monday." She slipped her arm in Harry's as they walked toward the park.

"I, er..." Harry began trying to think of what to say. He was glad Grigor was gone, but he couldn't tell Gabriella that; after all, he had sworn not to say. "That's okay... erm, anyway, I don't think your father likes me much."

"That's ridiculous," Gabriella shot back. "He's constantly asking about you."

"And what do you tell him?" Harry asked, wondering if Grigor was trying to keep track on Harry to make sure he kept away from his daughter. The question made Gabriella think of Harry's wizardry and she stopped to look at a large ice sickle dangling from the eave of a nearby roof.

"I swore in front of him that I would never pick up a wand again, Harry. It was I that demanded... begged we live as Muggles. He left everything he was... to please me," she ended with a sigh. "I never dreamed the boy next door would sweep me off my feet and turn out to be a... wizard," she said, whispering the last word. "He knows I still write you," she laughed, "but not how." Gabriella held Harry's arm, leaning her head against his shoulder, and they began to walk again. "I don't think he's been in my room since we arrived here. I still keep some of my brother's things and I believe he feels guilty for not being there when it happened." She stopped and looked into Harry's green eyes. "He still thinks you're a Muggle. All he knows is that you're away at that dreadful school of yours, and... well, he must know that I still love you. It's written all over my face, Mama says." Her eyes

twinkled, and Harry couldn't help but kiss her. "Swear to me you won't say a word to him."

"But if he knows I'm a wizard, then maybe..."

"Not yet, not know," she said, and then asked again, "Please swear."

"I swear," he said solemnly, wondering if Grigor might better accept him as a wizard. Perhaps things would be worse, considering the Darbinyan history.

Just then a car turned the corner, its tires hitting a puddle of water where they walked. Instinctively Harry held out his hand, but then stopped as the splash came raining down on the two of them. "Stupid rules," he muttered. They were both splattered in mud and the cold weather forced them to return to change clothes.

"You were going to stop that without a wand, weren't you?" she asked as they walked back home, and Harry nodded. "On the train, you stunned me without a wand as well. A lot of magic for such a young boy," she teased.

"Not so young!" said Harry, gently pinching her side. "I can drive you know." A look of shock spread across Gabriella's face.

"Asha!" she exclaimed. "I nearly forgot." She grabbed him by the hand and began to run. "Come on, come on!" They quickly returned to her house, but instead of going inside they slipped into the garage. There, lit by a bare bulb that hung from the ceiling, was Sirius' bike. Hagrid had completely refurbished it and even in the dim light the chrome seemed to magically glow. Harry swallowed hard, but instead of stepping forward, he stepped back.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Gabriella asked, confused. She wasn't the only one. All the emotions Harry felt from last summer suddenly came rushing in. His heart began to race and beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. He was going to take her away on that bike, to leave the Wizarding world behind. It was the bike that almost killed her. It was the bike on which he rode leaving her dead body behind. He

began to shake and Gabriella pulled him close. "It's only a bike, Harry, nothing more." But Harry shook his head.

"No, baby... it's much more," he whispered as his mind began to spin thinking about what had happened over the last few weeks. Then it stopped, fixing on an idea. "We could still do it," he said in a low voice. "Would it be so bad to live as Muggles?" he asked. In an instant she knew where his thoughts were leading and smiled gently.

"And get splashed by mud everyday, when you know you could stop it with the wave of your hand? To sit and read the paper about things you could take a hand in helping? No, Harry, that's not for you; it's written on your heart. You may not have chosen it originally, but you now freely follow the path that leads to Voldemort's defeat." He turned to look into her eyes.

"What about us?" he asked.

"Yes," she said with a sigh, "I know." She dropped her eyes and then brought them back up to meet Harry's. There was a heaviness in her look that carried with it wisdom, and for a moment Harry thought he was looking at Soseh. "I think I knew about you from the first day. What sort of Muggle hangs nearly naked out a window swatting at owls? Then, when your ear was pierced, and the glass shattered, I was certain. My first thought was to tell Mama and Papa. But, I didn't; I didn't need to. I'm sure Mama knows, but Papa... well his head is in the stars and always has been. I had sworn away my gifts on the memory of my dead brother. Was I to deny my oath for a wizard boy I had only known a few weeks?" Her words seemed to rock Harry, but her black eyes still conveyed warmth and love. "So I waited to see where we were going, you and I. At your birthday, I knew you were not an ordinary wizard, but someone with a special heart... a loving heart of all you touched. I think Mama, at least, knew that all along. It was her idea to ensure a special gift made its way to your hand."

"The stone," Harry whispered.

"A very special stone, Harry," Gabriella corrected. "Dudley swore he'd keep its source secret. The women in my family have been its guardians for generations and yet Mama insisted -- the stone was to

be yours. Not even Papa knew. By Muggle or wizard, it may be used in similar ways, but only those pure of heart might... no, it's your riddle to solve," she said, stopping herself.

"I... I solved it," Harry said simply. "At least, I think I have." She looked into his eyes with a mixture of exhilaration and disbelief. Then she seemed to gather in her excitement and put her hand firmly to Harry's face with a very serious look on her own.

"Listen carefully," she said. "Where? How? Who? Why?" she asked in an almost rhythmic canter. Was it another riddle or a simple series of questions? Looking at her intense stare, he was sure he couldn't ask for clarification. Unsure of what to say, he opted to answer each directly. He had solved the riddle in his dorm at Hogwarts. Inspired by Goyle's book, he used a fire spell to heat the ball, then holding it in his hand he pricked his finger.

"Were the dragon teeth your idea?" Harry asked with a smile, but her demeanor remained unchanged, her eyes set waiting for the rest of his answer, and so he continued.

He first thought to heal himself, to remove a problem he had, but then chose the Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. When he got to her last question, "Why?" he paused. There were any number of people he could have chosen... Ron, Draco, Tonks, Lupin, but only one was near death. Harry wondered if Dumbledore had not been ill, would he have chosen similarly. Finally he said, "Because I was about to lose the only family that I know... a grandfather of sorts that I love dearly."

"And what happened?" she asked, her eyes still intense.

"He joined us for breakfast the next morning, as healthy as I've ever seen him," Harry shrugged. The twinkle flashed in Gabriella's eyes and a smile crossed her face. She reached up and kissed Harry on the neck, hugging him close.

"She sees what others cannot," Gabriella beamed. "I thought it might be the beginning of her problems, but perhaps Mama was right."

"Right about what?" Harry asked. "What is that thing?"

"We are the world all around, Harry," she said slipping his wand from his Jeans' pocket. He reached to take it back, but she playfully held him at bay. "This piece of wood must fit its owner to work properly." She pointed it at a helmet lying on the motorbike's seat. "Al salah!" she commanded, and a silver beam of light struck the helmet and it rose into the air. But a moment later it fell to the floor. "I am useless with your wand," she grimaced, handing him the piece of holly. "A vivificus stone is not a healing stone, Harry. Unlike the wand, it transforms itself, mutating to the will of he who commands it. It reflects the soul of the individual and yields to his will. Before, I could not say what that thing was for you, but now I have an idea. Mama said we were kindred souls, you and I."

It was odd seeing the girl he'd spent the whole summer with performing magic. She had healed his scar, however small, with her touch, and now this. Harry wondered if he knew all there was to know about the young woman now before him. "We're not allowed to use magic out of school," he said with a tinge of rancor.

"Nor should I... ever," she scolded herself. She looked at Sirius' bike and then back to Harry. "Damn the mud, let's go see Duncan at the shop. He's waiting for you and it's almost lunch."

"But we just ate!"

"Don't be silly," she said grinning, and her eyes twinkling. "I promised Mama we'd put ten pounds on you in ten days and I don't want to lose the momentum we've started!" She reached down and picked up the helmet. "Let's go!"

Harry couldn't help but throw his leg over Sirius' bike. Gabriella sat behind wrapping her arms tight around his waist. For a long moment he stared at the key in the ignition.

"It's just a bike," she whispered, pulling him still closer. "Let go of its spirits."

Harry turned the key and they were off. It was good to have her close again, her body offering warmth against the cold. Riding through the

neighborhood he found himself, for the first time, happy to return to Little Whinging. When they passed the park, kids were still having snowball fights with what little powder remained. Driving up to the sports shop the memories of summer rushed back into his mind, only this time they were happy memories, and he grinned from ear to ear.

They entered the store, the bell by the door ringing loudly, but Duncan was nowhere to be seen. Near the front was an old man with heavy woolen pants and a large purple parka. Harry reached over and held out his hand. "Hello, Mr. Tonks," he said, a glint of mischief in his eye. Contrary to being surprised, the man simply smiled knowingly and took Harry's hand.

"My pleasure, Mr. Potter, Merry Christmas" and then to Gabriella, "Miss Darbinyan," he nodded politely, and then looked out the window at the bright day and smiled. "Another warm day and I might have a chance to play another round of golf." Then the smile fell. "But I hear on the wireless that the weather will be changing. Too bad... another white Christmas." He patted Harry on the shoulder and said, "Be safe, my lad," then turned and left the store.

"Who was that?" Gabriella asked.

"A regular," answered Harry just as he spotted Duncan emerge from a rack in the hunting section. "Duncan Fentley!" Harry yelled in the best imitation of the owner, Mr. Fettle, he could muster. "This place is a disaster! You're fired!" Startled, Duncan looked up to see Harry and Gabriella, and instantly burst into a sprint to the front door. He grabbed Harry in his arms and squeezed so tight, Harry thought he might pass out.

"Potter!" he growled. "Damn you! You left and the whole place has gone to hell!" He held Harry out with his hands scanning him up and down. "How are you? Damn, you're as thin as a rail; do they feed you at that school of yours?" Harry looked back at Duncan to find tears welling in the blonde's eyes. He grabbed Harry in his thick arms again and squeezed tight. "Christ, Harry, when Gabriella told us about the accident and I saw the bike, I thought we lost you for good. I'm glad you're back." Then Duncan turned to the back of the store wiping his face.

"Bartlet!" he called and a thin kid with a white shirt and black tie stepped out from the shoe section. "You've got the register! I'm out to lunch." The three walked over to Bentley's and ordered up some fish & chips. Sitting at the window-table watching people walk by with gifts in their arms, Harry felt like he'd never left.

"Sorry Emma ain't here to see you," started Duncan, taking a sip of soda. "Some bloody track competition in Nice. They'll be runnin' on the Côte D'Azur this weekend, and she flies back from Paris on Christmas Eve." He looked around the shop and then reached into his jacket pocket pulling out a small black box. "I have a bit of a surprise for her on Christmas," he beamed. Opening the box he revealed a diamond engagement ring. The band was gold, engraved with a pattern of thorns, and in its center rose a modestly sized marquise-cut diamond that sparkled brilliantly in the light.

"Oh, Duncan!" Gabriella gasped, holding her hand to her mouth. "It's... it's beautiful." Her eyes grew wet as she reached over the table hugging his neck.

"Hey!" Harry pulled her back grinning. "It's not for you." Gabriella slapped his shoulder.

"My word, Duncan," she said, misty eyed, "she'll love it!" Duncan eyed the ring for a moment then closed the box and slipped it into his pocket.

"Yeah," he whispered deep in thought, a bit of concern on his face. "But will she say 'yes'?"

"You know she will, Duncan!" Harry said, reaching over and slapping him on the shoulder. "Who else is gonna get her track shoes at half price?" The wisecrack wiped the concern off Duncan's face in an instant.

"That's only clearance, mind you," he said, pointing his finger at Harry, and the two laughed out loud. The waitress brought their food to the table and Duncan held up his cup of soda. "To good... no... to priceless friends." They each tapped cups and began to eat.

On their way back from lunch, Duncan stopped about a block from the shop. "Gabriella, could you walk ahead for a bit? I need to talk to Harry for just a minute."

"No problem, Duncan. Harry, I'll see you back at the store." She kissed him on the cheek and started on her way.

"That's a fine woman you have there, Harry," Duncan said as they both watched her walk down the street to the store. "She got my butt through the first term, when I was lookin' for any excuse to quit." He chuckled to himself. "Now I think I might join Emma at the University next year. Mr. Fettle thinks I have a head for business and wants me to work part time and go to school part time. He's gonna pay, and that means I don't need to lean on Mum and Dad, anymore."

"That's great, Duncan!" Harry encouraged, but he was still curious why that needed to be kept secret from Gabriella. "I know you and your folks never really, well..."

"Yeah," Duncan bristled, pulling his jacket up around his neck. "They're in South Africa now." Duncan stared down the street, a sullen look hung on his face when he turned back to his friend. "Listen, Harry... I was wonderin' if... well, if maybe you'd be my best man. I know you'll probably have other things to do and all, but if..." Harry grabbed Duncan by the shoulders and shook him to stop talking.

"Other things to do?" Harry squinted at his friend. "You're kidding, right? It'd be like saying 'no' to Charles and Lady Di." Harry held out his hand. "I'd be honored, Mr. Fentley." Duncan grabbed his hand and pulled him back into a bear hug, and then started talking very rapidly discussing plans, and times, and who else might be there, as they went to join Gabriella at the shop.

They invited Duncan for dinner at Gabriella's house and said their goodbyes. Then she and Harry decided to do a little shopping. It was growing dark as they made their way back home on Sirius' motorcycle, the waxing moon looming large above the rooftops. Gabriella held their purchases in one hand and held Harry in the

other. It had been so long since he last was home for Christmas, Harry had forgotten about all the lights. After arriving on the Hogwarts Express last night, he found the lights in London a gaudy spectacle, but here in town there was a warmth that Harry had never before recognized. The trees in the park were lit up with sparkling white lights and the homes were sprinkled in dazzling arrays of colour. On Privet Drive, nearly all the homes, except the Dursleys', were adorned in some fashion. But the most stunning of all was the Darbinyan household. The roof was set with strings of green and blue. The front trees were wound in red and white. Lighted candy canes lined the walk to the front door and each bush sparkled with a colour of the rainbow. Finally, in the center of it all was a nativity scene with figures that were carved of stone and hand painted. In the twinkling lights, Mary and Joseph looked as if they might walk off the front lawn.

"Brilliant!" Harry whispered, his eyes agog at the sight before him. Not wanting to offend Grigor should he return early, he decided to park the bike in the Dursley garage. As he rode up into the driveway he noticed, too late, Mrs. Figg out of the corner of his eye. It all happened in an instant. He heard Mrs. Figg scream and point at the sidewalk, as Gabriella yelled in his ear, and then the sickening thud as his bike struck something beneath the wheel. Quickly, Harry stopped the bike and both he and Gabriella climbed off to find one of Mrs. Figg's cats stretched out on the Dursley lawn, its breaths shallow and rapid.

"Sebastian!" Mrs. Figg screamed, running over with two other cats following in tow. Harry knelt close to the cat, his own heart pounding in his ears.

"No, not again," he thought to himself. Gabriella laid her hand on Harry's shoulder as Mrs. Figg fell to her own knees and began to weep, stroking the cat on the grass. It meowed in pain at the touch, sending shivers through them all.

"It's over," Gabriella said quietly. "It wasn't your fault, Harry. It was an accident." Harry shook his head in disbelief. How often would he hear those words? The lights from the Darbinyan home cast an eerie shadow on the lawn. Their flickering colours seemed to be playing

tricks with Harry's eyes. Or were they? He could see the light before him, and it wasn't the sparkle of Christmas.

He knelt down and picked the dying cat up into his arms. It moaned in pain and Mrs. Figg put her hand up to stop him, but he ignored it. Holding the cat close, his eyes began to focus on something he'd never seen before. There in his arms was not only the flesh and fur of a gray tabby, but the flickering light of its now waning life force. Harry blinked his eyes in disbelief. Concentrating hard on what was glowing before him, the vision to his sides began to fade; Mrs. Figg, Gabriella, the damp grass, and the other cats circling about grew faint as Harry found himself slipping into another place.

It was the same feeling he had when he was being pulled into the vivificus stone, only he and the cat were floating together into the nothingness and, as they did so, the cat's form faded leaving only the flicker of its life force. Instinctively, Harry reached for the faint glimmer of light. He put his hands forward, but the light seemed just out of reach. He grasped deeper, further into the darkness. Still, it seemed just outside his grasp. "Accio!" his mind called out, his body straining to the very fingertips. The twinkle of light seemed to float back, and he stretched with all his might until he felt its warmth touch his fingers.

Gently curling his hand around the energy, he pulled back from the darkness, he pulled out from the depths of the beyond. He felt his own life force coursing from his arms and into his hands, and watched as the cat's light grew bright. As his surroundings came back into view, he saw the cat's new light blending with its flesh and bone. Suddenly, he found himself in the here and now. He looked down to see the warm cat purring in his hands, but when he turned to speak with Gabriella, the world tilted and everything began to spin. The last thing he remembered was her calling his name and then all went dark.

"Come with me!" a girl's voice beckoned playfully in the darkness. She laughed and giggled. "Come on... it won't hurt."

"I won't go!" he cried out with a child's voice.

"Are you afraid?" she jeered.

"I'm not afraid of anything!" he yelled back, the echoes of his voice fading into nothingness. "I am lord over all!"

"Maybe over the monkey-bars," she teased. "Come on Tom! It's just water!" Harry heard a great splash.

"Get it off!" he screamed out. "Get it off!"

"Get it off!" Harry yelled, flailing at his face only to realize he was in the middle of the Dursleys' living room with Gabriella and Mrs. Figg looking down at him.

"It's okay, Harry," Gabriella said softly, "you're safe." She held out a wet washcloth to Harry's face and he recoiled. "It's just water," she said. "You're a bit feverish." The cobwebs refused to clear from Harry's brain as he looked around the pristine living room.

"I'm not afraid of the water," he said, his head still shaky, "you are!" He pulled off his shoes and socks and dropped them on the floor. "Come on, let's go swimming."

"Snap out of it, darling," Mrs. Figg said in a curt voice, and then she slapped him hard on the side of the face. Gabriella looked at her in horror. "Well, it works in the movies." Harry blinked his eyes.

"What... what happened?" he asked, slowly sitting up on the couch. "How'd I get here?"

"Well, darling," Mrs. Figg said in a very matter-of-fact voice, "you smashed my Sebastian with your motorbike, and then you healed her with some sort of green light."

"What?" Harry asked, incredulous. He reached back in his mind, trying to replay what had happened, but his memory failed.

"The Green Flame," Gabriella corrected. "Mrs. Figg saw the Green Flame." Harry rubbed his face with his hands. His skin was clammy and he felt weak and dizzy. Confused by what she said, he looked at her blankly, but she would say no more. It took a moment for him to

realize that Gabriella was holding back because of the presence of Mrs. Figg.

"It's okay," he said rubbing his temples. "Mrs. Figg, here... well, she's a Squib. I'm not too sure about her cats though." She had brought all three cats into the Dursley home with her, and the gray tabby swept its tail around Harry's leg. Gabriella seemed surprised, but only for a moment. She had sensed something in Mrs. Figg during their conversations on the street and now it seemed to all make sense. She dabbed his forehead with the wet washcloth and this time he remained still.

"Harry..." she began to think out loud, a tinge of excitement in her voice, "the stone takes on the characteristics its master. Your heart searched for good and healed your Headmaster. But the link with a vivificus stone is not just one way. The cinnabar will resonate its energy back into the master, amplifying the very characteristic he bestowed upon the stone. Skills that were once dormant or hidden can be brought to the fore. The ability to heal is not rare, but the ability to bring back a life-force is extraordinary. Your eyes flamed green, Harry, and returned the dead cat to life."

"That's impossible, darling," Mrs. Figg said in a disbelieving voice. "No one can..."

"Dumbledore can," Harry interrupted. "He brought me back from the dead; it was green flame."

"The dead?" asked Gabriella, her voice quivering. "Then it's true?" Harry simply nodded and closed his eyes in hopes the room would stop spinning. Instead of pressing further, she simply took the cloth and again wet his brow. "Harry, it is a flash of green light that wizards use to steal the life force of others. It is the Green Flame by which it may be returned. The ability has always been yours; the vivificus stone just let you see it and gave you the power to exercise it."

"You two are both touched, if you ask me," said Mrs. Figg, shaking her head.

"The killing curses are used all too often in my country, Mrs. Figg," Gabriella answered her lips thinning, a hint of steel in her voice. "The green flash has created many widows in Lebanon; this I have seen with my own eyes." She then took Harry's hand. "I have but heard tales of those able to wield the Green Flame, not just healing the injured, but returning those past death to life. Tonight, I have finally seen."

"Avada..." Harry began to think out loud, but Gabriella pressed his lips with her fingers and hushed him. There was a ripping sound and he turned to see a black cat clawing on Uncle Vernon's favorite chair. Aunt Petunia's chair was already in tatters. "Mrs. Figg, I'm okay, really, but I think you'd best take your cats home."

"Certainly, Harry," she nodded and stood. She clicked her tongue and the cats swarmed to her legs as she walked to the door. "And, Harry, please be careful with that two-wheeled machine of yours. Dumbledore wants you back in one piece, I'm sure." Harry grinned back as she left the door, then slumped back down on the couch.

"I feel like I've been run over by a train," Harry moaned, taking a deep breath.

"The stone's resonant energy is not permanent, Harry. Think of it as a great clockworks that needs winding. The more energy you can give it by tapping into the energy around us, the greater your strength becomes and the longer it will last. But if you draw more energy than the stone carries, you must ultimately draw it from yourself--your own life force."

"And anybody can use the stone? Muggle or wizard?" Harry asked, and Gabriella nodded.

"Muggles have heated such stones in fires, then used their power to help heal the sick."

"But it can also be used for evil, can't it?"

"Almost always, Harry," she answered dejectedly. "With such power few can resist the temptation to turn the stone to serve their own

greed. At such times, it must be... retrieved by its caretakers." As he lay with his head on the end of the couch, she too reclined placing her head on his chest. "It takes a special heart to turn the stone for good." She reached out and took Harry's hand in her own brushing it softly with her lips. She listened to the rhythm of his beating heart against her ear and smiled.

"And it would give tremendous power to those who would turn it to evil?" asked Harry, his voice pitching higher. His heart began to quicken and its beating grew louder in her ear.

"Yes," she whispered with concern.

"Why would you give me such a thing without telling me?" he cried. "It could have fallen into the wrong hands!"

"Harry," she answered calmly, "there is no safer place on earth than at Hogwarts. Even I have heard of your Headmaster, Dumbledore; the enchantments around his castle are legendary." She sat up and found the look of concern on Harry's face. "Besides, only your fellow Gryffindor, Goyle, knows of the stone. Surely he would not betray his housemate's confidence." A wave of nausea washed over Harry and he quickly sat up then leaned over placing his head between his knees. "Harry, what is it?"

"The cinnabar... it sits in the mouth of the dragonhead you gave me. It's out for all to see on my desk at Hogwarts. What if... what if..." Panicking, he began to hyperventilate. What if Goyle had been a Slytherin spy the whole time? How easy it would have been to simply renounce his father, earning Gryffindor's good graces. He'd seen him talking with Crabbe in the Great Hall. If Goyle spoke of the stone to his old friend, then Voldemort would know by now. And if Voldemort knew, then Hogwarts was in danger. Harry took in another deep breath. What if Dumbledore was not well? Sure, he looked healthy, but the graying wizard had hidden his illness early in the year. He might have done it again. Harry gulped for more air.

"Harry... you're breathing too fast!" Gabriella said, her own voice rising as she began to take on Harry's panic. But it was too late. The panic washed up from Harry's innards, and he wretched over Aunt

Petunia's oak coffee table. "Oh, no," Gabriella said softly. The expulsion of fluid in Harry's stomach seemed to take with it the fear and his breaths slowed. He needed to get control of himself and whimpering in the Dursley living room wasn't the way to do it. Gabriella ran to the kitchen and brought him a glass of warm water.

"Drink this," she offered. Taking the glass, Harry swallowed a healthy gulp and regained his composure. His mind quickly scanned the possibilities. In his heart he knew that Goyle was no traitor, but he remembered his promise to himself that he would not be fooled. Post by owl would take too long and he needed to speak with the Order now. He stared intently at the wall in the Dursley living room.

"Gabriella," he said, looking at her with determined eyes, "I must speak with someone, right away." He stood and so too did she. "Do you have an axe?"

Chapter 45 - Red Light at Morning

The cats had spread flecks of fur all over Aunt Petunia's living room. They had scratched at her sofa, torn her chairs, and a distinct odour caused Harry to wonder if they hadn't left something more behind. That, mixed with his own vomit now dripping down the sides of the coffee table, freed Harry's conscience to throw caution to the wind.

"I said I need an axe! Do you have one?" he asked again, trying to remember if perhaps Vernon kept one in the garage. Gabriella stood, a bit confused, unable to see where he was going with his thoughts.

"We have a small hatchet at home," she offered.

A few minutes later Harry was hacking away at the living room wall. Splinters of wood fell like hail to the floor. Gabriella stood back, her face holding a look that was somewhere between horror and amusement. She had no idea what he was up to, but she enjoyed watching Harry exert himself physically. Before long, his face was red with exhaustion as he cracked the larger boards away.

"This would be so much easier you know if..." he said, looking to Gabriella for magical assistance. But she simply shook her head and flashed him a sly smile.

"You know," she reprimanded, "if you'd eat better at that school of yours, this wouldn't be so difficult." Harry pursed his lips, then simply glared at her with a smirk. "And, have you ever thought of lifting weights? It would improve your Quidditch stamina; although from what Ron told me on the train, even as thin as you are you still make a passable Seeker."

"Passable!" Harry squealed, ripping another board off the wall with a large crack. He turned to look at the black eyes twinkling with delight before him. He was huffing deeply, his arms taking a much needed rest at his sides. "I'll have you know that I'm the best Seeker at Hogwarts, maybe in all of England!"

"I can see that." She grinned, staring at him nearly ready to crumple to the floor. "Well, is that what you're looking for?" She pointed at the

wall behind Harry. The removal of the last board revealed a façade of brick... the mantle of the fireplace hidden behind.

"Finally," he breathed. This time Gabriella stood and helped him pull the remaining boards away to expose the fireplace that Mr. Weasley had used to visit him in his fourth year. "Ron's dad said it was set-up after the motorcycle accident. I hope it's still connected to the network."

"Why didn't you tell me that's what you were going to do?"

"Would you have helped?" Harry panted.

"No. But at least I wouldn't have thought you had gone mad."

The last word caused Harry to look at her twice, and he knew she'd sensed the change in his emotions. For a moment, he thought about telling her of the curse, but now was not the time. He pointed at a piece of splintered wood.

"Please, hand me that," he said, and together they tossed in some of the broken boards and began a fire. Then, Harry dashed up the stairs.

He shot into his room and pulled back the loose floorboards. The small space was filled with all sorts of things he'd collected from his trips to Diagon Alley, or received as gifts from Ron and Hermione. He slipped out a small pouch of floo powder and started to put the boards back when a golden wrapper caught his eyes. He grabbed it, and ran down stairs.

Gabriella was stoking the fire when he knelt at her side and offered her the chocolate frog from Honeyduke's. "What's this?" she asked, opening the package only to leap back as the frog hopped onto her shoulder. With lightning reflexes she had it in her hand and the look of surprise washed into a smile. "A chocolate frog?" She took a bite and a look of pure pleasure filled her eyes.

"I'm going to see Mr. Weasley; I'll be back in a flash," he said with a wink. "Just wait here."

"You'd better! Duncan will be by soon, and I still haven't told Mama we're having guests for dinner."

"Really, this'll only take a moment. I swear," said Harry, kissing her gently. "Less, if it doesn't work properly. You might want to keep that glass of water handy." He sprinkled the powder and in a flash he was at Grimmauld Place.

The first thing he noticed was the smell of peppermint in the air. He heard Christmas music playing upstairs and then the squeak of the opening kitchen door. Mrs. Weasley was carrying a platter of cookies, and when she saw Harry her jaw dropped and the platter fell to the ground.

"Harry!" she said, running to him and wrapping him in a large hug. Stepping back, however, she realized he was covered in sawdust and ash, and his face had a sallow pallor to it. "Merlin! What's happened to you?" The commotion got the attention of everyone in the house. Ron and Ginny came out of the kitchen, Fred appeared on the landing up the stairs, and Mr. Weasley walked out of the study. Everyone seemed to say his name at once and instantly converged to see what the matter was. After repeating for the fifth time that he was fine and that he was only here to visit, he finally got close enough to whisper in Mr. Weasley's ear.

"I need to speak with you, sir."

"Okay everyone!" Mr. Weasley called out. "Give him some room. Come with me Harry. I need to speak with you for a minute, and then you can visit with the family." Only Ron seemed to know something was wrong as Mr. Weasley took Harry by the shoulder and walked him into the study closing the door behind. "Alright, Harry," he said, "let's hear it." Harry couldn't help but notice that the man before him seemed more aged than ever. Clearly his work with the Ministry was taking its toll.

"Where's Remus... and George?" Harry asked, realizing he'd missed them in the front.

“George is minding the store,” Mr. Weasley said smiling. “They’re pulling in a lot of money this time of year, and I understand you are a major stock holder. It should make for a tidy New Year’s bonus.” Harry shrugged, not wanting to appear too pleased, but inside he was excited that Fred and George’s dream had come to fruition. “As for Remus...,” Mr. Weasley sighed, “he should be resting, but instead he’s still out searching for the students. I hope he gets back soon... three more nights until... well, you know.”

“Sir,” began Harry tentatively, “how are things at Hogwarts? Is Professor Dumbledore still well?” Mr. Weasley smiled and leaned forward in his chair.

“The man is amazing, Harry. We thought he was on his last breaths and only today he was arguing for the rights of Centaurs at the Ministry. He thinks they’ll turn the tide in our war against the darkness. Tonks keeps trying to have him go to St. Mungo’s just for a check-up, but he’s a stubborn old man -- says he’s too busy. “I don’t see why; there are only a handful of students at the school.” Then Mr. Weasley narrowed his eyes at Harry. “Why? What’s the matter?” Harry bit his lip trying to put together what he should say. If Dumbledore was well, then the school was safe, and so too the stone. But now wasn’t the time for secrets.

“There’s a special object in my possession,” Harry said, choosing his words carefully. “It’s now in my room at Hogwarts and I have reason to believe that Vold...” Mr. Weasley winced, “that You-Know-Who might want it.”

“What object?”

“I... I’d rather not say, sir.” At Harry’s words, Mr. Weasley nodded his head, willing to let the question remain unanswered. He leaned back in his chair and put his hands together.

“Very well, Harry. I’ll have two Ministry representatives watch the school while you’re on vacation. If they sniff the smallest problem, I’ll have them signal at once. Then, when you get back from holiday, you can secure it as you best see fit.” Satisfied, Harry nodded. He was, as usual, overreacting and Mr. Weasley was probably being more than

kind offering two Ministry members when they could otherwise be out looking for Luna and Neville.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, rising from his chair. "I'd better go."

"You're not staying?" asked Mr. Weasley.

"I've got to get back. Gabriella's waiting for me," Harry answered with a slight blush in his cheeks.

"I see," said Mr. Weasley, smiling as he rose from his chair to escort Harry out of the study. "She's a fine girl, Harry... a fine girl." Just as they reached the door, Harry stopped and turned to look into Mr. Weasley's eyes.

"She's a witch," he said simply, wondering what the response would be. The corners of Mr. Weasley's smile widened a bit.

"Ron mentioned your holiday surprise on the train. Yes, Harry, she is a witch, and a fine one from what I've heard, considering her circumstance," he said gently. "Her father could have taught at Hogwarts."

"How long have you known?" asked Harry a bit surprised at the answer. Mr. Weasley leaned against the door thumbing his fingers.

"Well, the Ministry has known since the Darbinyans moved to England. They had to register, of course." Seeing the look on Harry's face, he tried to explain. "As you might imagine, we've been watching them like hawks, but they seem harmless enough and they are entitled to their own privacy if they choose. I'm sorry that we couldn't tell you, Harry. There are countless magical families who wish to join the great majority of our society, and say what you might, Muggles are the majority. And, as you found out last summer, Muggles can live enjoyable lives. The Darbinyans are not unique in that regard. Of course, like most they cannot always resist the temptation. We've been watching Privet Drive closely and there has been some sporadic magic across the street from Number four -- no doubt to dust or some such thing. I've tried to get Molly to try going Muggle-style for just a week, but we never seem to make it through a single

day. There's got to be a better way to do dishes." Mr. Weasley laughed.

"I wish I had a pence for every dish I washed for my Aunt Petunia. I'd be as rich as..." Harry stopped, realizing that he already was rich. Indeed, if what Remus said was true, he was among the richest sixteen year olds in England. For the first time in a long while, his mind flashed to the Ministry where Sirius fell through the curtain. Mr. Weasley noticed the expression at once.

"It's the walls, Harry," he consoled, moving the wisps of hair that concealed Harry's scar from off his face. "Molly can scrub them shiny, but they still speak to us every night. Speaking of scrubbing... you are a bit ripe." He pulled out his wand and tapped Harry on the forehead. The ash and dust vanished from Harry's face and hair, and his clothes looked like they'd just come from the cleaners. Mr. Weasley put his arm around Harry's shoulder and opened the door. "You'd best be getting on before she starts to wonder if you're coming back at all."

"Who?" asked Ron. He was standing outside the door, still waiting to see what was the matter. "What's going on, Harry?"

"Oh... nothing, Ron," Harry said, feeling much better. "I guess I was worried about Hogwarts is all." Ron tried to follow-up his questions, but Harry stopped him before he could start. "Listen, now that I know we're still on the network, I'll stop by Christmas."

"Wonderful, Harry," said Mr. Weasley. "I'll make sure we keep the fire burning."

"But why would you..." Ron stammered, but too late. The fire flashed and Harry was back at Privet Drive. Stepping from the embers, he brushed a bit of ash from his sleeves, and found himself alone in the living room. His concern heightened when he heard Gabriella at the door arguing.

"I said you had to wait!" she yelled.

"But it's bloody cold out here, woman!" The voice was Duncan's.

"Let him in!" Harry called out. Peeking back to see that Harry had returned, Gabriella let the blonde through the front door. When his eyes saw the devastation of the living room they nearly burst from his head.

"What the bloody hell happened?" He gawked at the splintered wood and ash scattered everywhere. "I'd say you'd been on a drinking binge, if I didn't know you were more sober than an alter boy just a few hours ago. He stepped into the living room only to feel the squish of a cat dropping beneath his foot. Slowly, he lowered his gaze to see what was on the bottom of his shoe and groaned. "For the love of..."

"Look," Gabriella interrupted, "I'm sure Mama's started dinner by now. Let's go over to my place and we can deal with this mess later -- much later."

"Brilliant idea, Gabriella!" Harry commended. And before long Gabriella was in the kitchen with Soseh, while Harry and Duncan sat at the table, their shoes outside, discussing football.

"I tell you, Harry," said Duncan his voice revving with excitement, "Chelsea is the best there is this year." Harry was a bit surprised, really. The last he'd read before he left for school was that Newcastle was the team to beat. The glint of disbelief in Harry's eyes made Duncan bristle in defense. "You don't believe me? They beat Newcastle 4-0, Arsenal 3-1, Exeter 5-1..."

"Okay! Okay!" Harry surrendered. Soseh placed a large plate of lamb in the center of the table and the conversation instantly gave way to hunger. Soon the table was filled with a variety of dishes, and Harry couldn't help but keep an eye on the mince pie cooking in the oven.

"I don't understand, Harry," Soseh said with glowing eyes. "You eat twice as much as Duncan and yet he looks as if he could break you like a toothpick." She slid some dolmades over in front of him, and he graciously took two more stuffed grape leaves.

"Then I guess I'll have to eat three times as much!" he said with a smile popping one in his mouth. Soseh beamed with joy and for a

moment they held each others gaze, dark brown and emerald green. It was as if she was filling him with happiness, and he leaned over and kissed her cheek. "This will be the best Christmas ever." A tear slipped down from Soseh's eye and she seemed to struggle for the words to say.

"It's okay, Mama," said Gabriella quietly, taking her mother's hand in her own. Still, Soseh stared at Harry, her lip trembling. "Mama... it's okay." The alarm went off signaling that the pie was ready, breaking the trance holding Soseh's mind. She took a deep breath and rose to take the pie from the oven.

Desert and coffee finished, Harry and Duncan bundled up for their short walks home. They thanked Mrs. Darbinyan profusely, but she was not to be outdone. Since Duncan was alone, she invited him to spend as much of the holidays at the Darbinyan home as he was able. His belly full, Duncan accepted Soseh's gracious invitation almost before she got the words out. Soseh hugged his waist and said, "A home lives or dies from the laughter it hears, and these walls have had a grand time tonight."

And so it was that Duncan came for dinner on the night Harry had dreaded since his arrival on Privet Drive. When they were in the park playing football with friends earlier that day, Harry told Duncan about Grigor's request that he keep his path separate from Gabriella's. Duncan tried to be supportive, saying that Grigor was just being protective of his daughter in a new country. Still, on this evening, as Harry and Duncan walked to the Darbinyan door to ring the bell, Harry felt the perspiration break out on the palms of his hands. His mouth felt like cotton.

Gabriella opened the door, and the two boys stepped in. The room was filled with pipe smoke, and through the thin haze Harry saw Grigor seated in his leather chair. He was smoking while another gentleman, seated on the couch next to him, read the paper. Harry took a deep breath and entered the living room, bolstered by the fact that Duncan was at his side in his moment of need.

"Hey... erm, Gab," stuttered Duncan. "Can I use your watercloset?"

“Sure, just down...”

“Yeah, I know,” he cut in, and disappeared down the hall.

Harry felt like following after when Grigor stood from his chair waiting for Harry to walk to him. Harry obliged with Gabriella at his side. The man at the couch continued to read the paper seemingly oblivious to the new arrivals.

“Papa,” said Gabriella brightly, “you remember Harry from last summer?”

“Certainly, my dear,” said Grigor, still holding the pipe between his teeth. “How could I forget.” He slipped the pipe out of his mouth with his left hand, and held out his right. “She never stops talking about you, boy. How have you been?” Ignoring Grigor’s added emphasis on the word boy, Harry held out his clammy hand and shook Grigor’s as firmly as he dared.

“Never better, sir,” said Harry, swallowing hard. He’d rather be standing before Voldemort right now.

“Good... good,” Grigor nodded. There was a happiness on Grigor’s face that seemed to make Gabriella’s glow and she put her arm around Harry. But, Harry noted something more hidden in Grigor’s black eyes. He’d seen such a look of happiness before. “Mr. Barghouthi, I’d like you to meet a close friend of my daughter’s, Harry Dursley.” The two words struck like a discordant arpeggio in Harry’s brain. He started to correct Grigor when Gabriella pinched his side hard. Mr. Barghouthi stood as Harry extended his hand and the two shook.

“Pleasure, Harry,” said Mr. Barghouthi with a thick accent and a deep scratchy voice. He stood taller than Harry, and his hands were callused and rough. His skin was an earthen brown and his hair black. Harry guessed he might be Greek, or Turkish.

“Mr. Barghouthi is a visiting professor at the school, Harry.”

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Harry said politely. The two men sat back down, and Harry and Gabriella walked over to the hall just off the kitchen where Soseh was busy preparing the meal.

"What was that about?" Harry hissed under his breath. "You know I'm not..."

"Do you have a clue what the last name Potter means in the Wizarding world?" Gabriella asked. She reached up and flicked at Harry's hair with her fingers brushing it down so that it more heavily covered his scar. "He thinks you're a Muggle; let's keep it that way. Your father's brother is Vernon Dursley, so that makes you Harry Dursley, okay?" The thought of pretending to be a Dursley was almost too much to bear. Still, seeing the smile in her eyes, he nodded his head in agreement.

"Did I miss anything, mate?" Duncan asked sauntering down the hall and tucking in his shirt. Harry thought he might punch him in the gut, but simply rolled his eyes and groaned. "What? What happened?"

Before long they were all sitting around the table having another wonderful meal. Before they sat, Harry tried to put Duncan between himself and Grigor, but Duncan, seemingly oblivious, took Harry's chair leaving Harry to sit next to Grigor. "More like Ron every day," Harry thought as he pulled out the chair at Grigor's side. The food was fabulous and the conversation light. Indeed, all was well until Grigor mentioned that he wouldn't be home for Christmas Eve.

"What do you mean?" shot Soseh, clearly agitated. "You're never home and now you tell me you won't be here on one of the most important days of the year!"

"That would be Christmas, Soseh," said Grigor calmly. "And I will be home to take you all to church. But Christmas Eve is too important for me to miss. I have students coming in from all over to use the telescope."

"The full moon," Harry said, recalling his conversation with Mr. Weasley.

“Precisely!” Grigor exclaimed. “See, dear, even Harry knows.” And then he turned to Harry with an excitement in his eyes that Harry had never seen before. “But it is not just a full moon, Harry. Mars rises in conjunction! My only wish is that the clouds part long enough for us to have a clear view. The red planet is as bright as it has been in centuries, and just after midnight tomorrow it will appear to pierce the glowing moon. Even with the full moon ready to swallow Mars, its red light will be bright enough to see with your naked eye! But with the school’s telescope, the view will be breathtaking. Perhaps you’d like to come see it for yourself?” The words made Soseh breathe out in disgust and walk away from the table. The idea was intriguing and Harry almost took him up on the offer, but Gabriella shot eyes at him from across the table that clearly indicated what his answer should be.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Harry apologized. “I promised Duncan and Gabriella we’d go caroling tomorrow night as soon as his friend Emma gets in.”

“From Paris,” said Grigor sharply, as he stabbed at his plate with his fork. For an instant he seemed angry, or viciously pleased with himself.

“Yes, sir,” replied Harry. “But how did you know...”

“Caroling?” asked Duncan and he started choking on a small piece of fish. Grigor stood and slapped him on the back, dislodging the fish. The distraction was enough everyone forgot their train of thought.

“Well, if you change your minds, you’re all welcome to come,” said Grigor, raising his voice and pointing it purposefully at Soseh who was now adjusting plates in the kitchen. He put his hand on Harry’s shoulder and winked with a smile. “She’s still a goddess,” Grigor whispered. “Don’t you think?” Harry smiled back, and the two returned to the meal before them, discussing mythological reasons why Mars might be so bright.

When Gabriella walked with Harry back across the street, he felt like he was walking on air. Not only did dinner not go bad, it went astoundingly well. He spent much of the evening talking with Grigor about various astronomical events now taking place in the skies above. Grigor was particularly keen on what he thought might be a

new star. Well after the meal had ended, Mr. Darbinyan pulled down an old bottle of brandy and poured out four glasses for the four men. They toasted for clear skies tomorrow night; they toasted for the health of family abroad; they toasted for Emma's safe return; and they toasted for peace throughout the world. Harry missed the first step leading to the Dursley front door, but Gabriella caught his fall.

"I think you've had a little too much brandy, Harry," Gabriella chided as she helped him into the house. Harry flopped onto the couch sending a cloud of dust into the air.

"You are going to clean this place before the Dursley's get back, aren't you?" she asked.

"I swear!" said Harry raising his hand in the air, and then letting it flop down at his side. "You could help you know," Harry winked in an exaggerated manner and slipping out his wand from inside his jacket pocket. She flopped down next to him sending another cloud into the air, ignoring his gesture.

"I think that went rather well, don't you?" she asked, taking the wand and slipping it back in Harry's jacket.

"Yeah, except now I'm a Dursley," Harry grimaced. "I feel like I should take a shower."

"That might be nice," she said. Her lips smiled and her eyes twinkled as she took his hand. As the two reached the top floor, Harry stopped and kissed her gently on the lips.

"Yes, this is going to be the best Christmas ever!"

Chapter 46 - And So It Begins

The wind whistled against the window of Harry's room as he rolled over in his bed. The weatherman had said a disturbance was moving in, promising to dump a blanket of snow across the whole of Great Britain. It would be a white Christmas, thought Harry as he pulled the covers up over his head trying to get another few minutes of rest. She would be pounding on the door if he slept much longer, but the darkening clouds made it seem earlier than it was, and the wind made him feel cold.

They were going to have breakfast with Duncan this morning, before he started on his way to Heathrow Airport to pick up Emma who wasn't leaving Paris until later in the afternoon. Ridiculously early as far as Harry was concerned, but Duncan was insistent that he have plenty of time should something happen on the way. The wind howled again and Harry shivered, curled up into a ball and drifted back to sleep.

In what seemed like less than a moment later, Harry found himself jarred awake. He had heard something, a knock? Then, there was another banging sound from downstairs and the curse of what was unmistakably a male's voice. Or was it two? Yes, there were two men downstairs and they were arguing in hushed whispers. Instantly, Harry grabbed his glasses and picked his wand from off his dresser. Slowly, quietly, he slid to the corner of the room, providing a better attack position, but no ability for escape. They were definitely moving up the stairs now.

"He's in there," came a whisper from beyond the door.

"I know that stupid," was the hushed reply. "Don't wake the whole bloody house!"

The handle began to turn and the door slowly opened. Noting that the best defense was a strong offense, Harry began his spell. "Stupef...f-f-f," he stalled. If they would have had hair of any color other than red, they'd be splattered on the far wall already.

“Hello, Harry!” whispered Ron, staring curiously at his best friend who looked like a spider hunched in the corner waiting for its next victim. His brother Fred was at his side, wearing a scowl and obviously in a foul mood. It took Harry a second to realize that they must have come through the fireplace. Slowly, he uncoiled himself from the wall and walked over to the two Weasley brothers.

“Hey, Ron. Hey, Fred,” said Harry slipping his wand away. “What happened to you?” he pointed at Fred who looked nearly as bad as Harry did the night before. Fred narrowed his eyes and stepped closer to Harry looking down menacingly on the younger Gryffindor.

“Mum thought it would be a smashing idea for Ron’s big brother to watch out for him on his first trip alone to Harry’s. Need to make sure the fireplace is safe for my baby brother, don’t I? So I go first to find the Potter living room in a disaster. I draw my wand and yell for him to wait, but no. Two seconds and he’s falling down on top of me pushing me into a mixed pile of ash and semi-dried vomit. And this!” Fred held up his wand, splintered into two pieces. I am never coming to this dragon pit again.”

The dragon insult prickled the hairs on the back of Harry’s neck and he didn’t know why. Comparing the Dursleys to dragons was an insult to dragons everywhere. As far as he was concerned, the Dursley home was a—

“I told you not to come,” Ron shot back a bit miffed. “I don’t need you, or George, watching my every move.”

“If this wasn’t shattered I’d...”

“You’d what,” Ron challenged stepping nose to nose with his older brother. Harry never really realized that Ron had grown so much over the last year. There was silence as Ron and Fred glared into each other’s eyes, their faces only inches apart. Seconds ticked by, neither speaking, neither blinking, then Ron cracked a smile, and the two began to laugh.

“Got you, little brother,” Fred quipped victoriously. “Harry, keep an eye on the little boy, will you? He’s been a right mope waiting for...”

Ron poked Fred in the side to silence him. "Yeah, yeah, okay. Look, Ron's due back about ten tonight and I don't want to have to come get him." He turned to go then stopped in the hallway. "Er, Harry, could you start the fire?" he asked, holding the shards of his wand in his hand.

Harry had just lit some paper with matches when there was a familiar knock on the front door. Without waiting, the door opened and in walked Gabriella.

"Fred! Ron!" she said brightly, walking over and giving them both hugs. "Merry Christmas!" She took her hand and dusted Fred's sleeves. "What happened to you?"

"I hope Olivander's is still open," muttered Fred. He reached into his pocket for floo powder and a look of realization filled his eyes. "Oops! Almost forgot, Harry." He reached into his other pocket and pulled out a small box. "It's too much to be hauling around." Harry took the box as Fred turned to his girlfriend. "Gabriella, you're as stunning as ever and when you come to your senses about Harry... I'll be waiting!" This time he took the floo powder into his hand. "Remember, little brother, ten tonight!" He called for Diagon Alley and vaporized in a puff of purple flame.

"Ron, Harry didn't mention you'd be by today."

"Thought I'd surprise him," replied Ron. "Things back home are a bit... dull." Hearing his words and seeing the look on his face, Gabriella knowingly smiled. Harry, however, paid little attention as he unwrapped the small box. Inside was a key, a Gringotts key. "They've started you an account, Harry. We know you don't like the thought of spending Sirius' money. This here is for your share of the shop's profits, money you should be happy to spend." Harry held the key up and turned it in his fingers. He had helped create something that was bringing happiness during these dark times and a smile crossed his face.

"Tell Fred and George thanks, when you get back tonight, okay?" Ron nodded as Harry started to tuck the key into his pants, and then realized he wasn't wearing any.

“Yes, Harry, you need to get dressed,” said Gabriella briskly, slapping her hands together. “We only have about fifteen minutes, so get going!” Ron had to smile as Harry hopped up the stairs without saying a word. “You are going to clean this place up today, right?” she yelled as he disappeared into the hallway.

“Er, yeah. I swear!” Harry called back.

Harry drove Gabriella’s car to the breakfast shop where they found Duncan standing on the curb waiting. He had a great grin on his face as he saw Harry at the wheel pulling up to the curb.

“Not a bad parking job, mate,” said Duncan with a grin, “for an incurable criminal.” Harry shook his hand and made quick introductions as Duncan was eager to get breakfast over with and be on his way.

“You know, Dunc,” said Harry. “You’ve got plenty of time.”

“Sure, if I don’t get a flat tire or, run into some other problem. The weather’s supposed to take a turn. I don’t want Emma waitin’ at the gate wonderin’ where I am.” Duncan’s hand was in his jacket pocket and Harry figured he was thumbing the little box that held the band of gold that would be around Emma’s finger tomorrow morning.

“Is that where you got the idea?” Ron asked Harry, pointing to Duncan’s earring of thorns. Harry shrugged stroking the now worn silver lightning bolt.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said. “Well, it was really her idea.” Gabriella smiled, and then stroked the side of Harry’s nose.

“You know, we could add one right here.” She tapped his nose with a grin and Harry shook his head taking her hand in his.

“I think I’d do it,” Ron said pensively, “but she doesn’t want me to.” He held his own ear. “Maybe a diamond er something.”

“Or a ruby!” said Gabriella excited. “With your hair, it would be...”

"She?" Harry asked, putting his fork down on his plate. Ron glanced out the window, and took another gulp of juice. "Your Mum?"

"Don't be silly," Gabriella said, poking at Harry's ribs. "Hermione of course."

"Hermione?" Harry stammered. It was as if he was picking up a box that was too large. It wasn't that it was too heavy, he just couldn't seem to get his hands around it.

"Certainly, Ron, you've told him that you and—" she stopped herself sensing the emotions roiling out from Ron as he just continued to look through the window, his ears reddening. "Oh, dear...."

"Who's this, Herminny, eh?" Duncan asked taking a last sip of coffee. "Certainly she's got nothin' on our Gabriella here." Ron turned, almost defensive.

"Duncan, let me walk you to your car," said Gabriella slyly. "We don't want Emma waiting now, do we?"

"No, no we don't!" he said slapping the table and standing. "Ron, damn good to meet you. Always great to see the kind of criminals Harry here hangs with." Ron shook Duncan's hand as the blonde ruffled Harry's hair with the other. "See you guys tonight, and we can compare the ladies." He winked and walked with Gabriella out of the shop. Ron turned to Harry. It seemed like the first time all year they had a moment alone together.

Harry was still in a trance. "Hermione?" he asked in a weak whisper. In his mind, the box was becoming a bit more manageable.

"Well, we... we tried to tell you, Harry," Ron said apologetically. "Well, more me than her. I was hoping you'd figured it out at Hogwarts, but she didn't want to press it. I thought if I told her about Gabriella she'd change her mind. But she was still worried you'd get mad, or lose focus. I guess... the scar and all...." There was a long silence as Harry said nothing. "Maybe she was right," Ron muttered pushing his

plate forward. But then a warm smile broke out on Harry's face and his eyes lit bright.

"Brilliant," he whispered. "Since when?" he asked. But then, "No, wait... Germany." His smile grew broader. He could tell by Ron's reddening face he was right. "Watching whales, eh? You went to be together in Germany... to be together." Harry shook his head. "Nitwit, Potter," said Harry, and he had to laugh at himself. He pushed his chair back and stood from the table saying, "Come on; stand up." Hesitantly, Ron obliged. Harry wrapped him in his arms. "It's perfect, Ron, absolutely perfect." The redhead grinned himself as a great weight had just evaporated into the ether.

"I told her you'd understand," he said as they both returned to their chairs, "but nooo, I have to tiptoe all year long just to..." he stopped himself short. Ron had been aching to talk to Harry about Hermione since last summer and now that they'd broken the ice he still wasn't sure how far he should go.

"So," Harry stepped in, thirsty for more information from his friend, "is she a good kisser?" Ron instantly reddened and then a sly glint crossed his eyes.

"Is Gabriella a good kisser?" Harry leaned in close. "She's a goddess, Ron. The things she can do with her fingers! Just last night... AYE!" Ron had been watching as Gabriella stepped up behind Harry.

"I can do this with my fingers," she said between her teeth as she briefly clenched a nerve in Harry's neck that sent spasms down the right side of his body, "to little braggarts who can't keep their mouths shut!" Ron burst out laughing, as Harry crumpled in his chair.

"She's a goddess of war, Harry!" joked Ron. "You better watch yourself." Harry stood, rubbing his neck and apologized, a deed for which he received a kiss. Ron turned toward the window. "Wow, look at it come down!" Outside the snow was starting to fall heavily.

"We'd better get back," said Gabriella handing Harry his jacket. "Maybe Duncan was right to leave early. I hope they make it back okay."

As the sky darkened, the three made their way back to Gabriella's driveway, the snow already clinging in the street. Harry no sooner stepped out of the car than a majestic owl swooped down in front of him. Harry watched it turn for another pass and this time it dropped a parchment directly in Harry's hands. The great owl then climbed until it disappeared into the falling snow. Harry looked down to find a wax seal bearing the Malfoy crest.

"Who's it from, Harry," asked Ron, holding his jacket tight around his neck.

"Malfoy," Harry responded before thinking. They were under the eaves of Gabriella's house, the snow now over an inch deep on the front lawn.

"Malfoy!" exclaimed Gabriella as she brushed the snow from her coat. "Draco Malfoy?" Harry looked at her in surprise. How could she possibly... "Isn't that the boy that nearly killed Cho?"

"He's an evil git is what he is," Ron jumped in. "He's got the mind of a snake and the heart of a... well, he doesn't have one of those. Don't open it, Harry! I'll bet you a pound to a pence it's probably hexed."

Harry looked at the scroll carefully. He knew it wasn't hexed. There was red and green trim on the edges and Harry's name was in rather elegant gold-leaf script. Harry thought it a Christmas card, but he wasn't going to open that in front of Ron. "Er, yeah, probably," he agreed with Ron. "Hang on." He ran across the street into number four and tossed the scroll on the living room table. He'd read it later. Then, looking at the mess, he made a mental note that he'd definitely get to that tomorrow too.

They entered the Darbinyan household and found Soseh tinkering with an ornament on the Christmas tree. Gabriella called her name, but she seemed entranced with the shiny red orb of glass that hung at the side of the tree. "Asha," Soseh muttered under her breath, and then something else Harry now understood to be Armenian, but still couldn't translate.

“What’s she saying?” Harry whispered to Gabriella. She shook her head and slipped off her coat hanging it from a hook near the door. Ron and Harry followed suit, wiping their feet on the mat by the door.

“She thinks she sees my brother, Antreas,” Gabriella said sadly, “wrapped in a chain of thorns.” Gabriella sighed and walked over to her mother.

“Mama?” Gabriella said softly as if gently waking a baby from its slumber. “Mama? Antreas is fine; he’s safe with God now. Come on, I’m home. Sorry we took so long.” Slowly, Soseh seemed to realize they were in the room. “Have you seen the snow, Mama? We’ll have a white Christmas, just like you dreamed of!” A large smile spread across Soseh’s face as Gabriella walked her to the window.

“A white Christmas!” Soseh beamed, looking out onto the front yard. And then, as if nothing had ever been wrong, she turned to Harry. “This is your friend, Harry, is it not?” She strode over to Ron pinching his cheek. “Yes! Perhaps you can teach our Harry here how to eat! What’s your name my child?”

“Ron... Ron Weasley, ma’am.” He reached out his hand to shake, but Soseh wrapped him in her arms, and then patted his stomach.

“Have you had lunch?” she asked. “No... no, of course, I forgot, you just had breakfast with Duncan. A fine boy like yourself, Ron! Perhaps just a snack then.” Soseh went into the kitchen and started preparing a plate for the three teenagers. Ron followed her to the kitchen and began suggesting items she might add. The gesture seemed to fill Soseh with pure joy.

“Gab... is she okay?” Harry asked. It was the first time he’d really seen Soseh so unresponsive and it was a bit frightening.

“Another bout of senility,” Gabriella sighed. “I was hoping by now....” She looked at Ron working with her mother in the kitchen and tried to smile, but instead shuddered as she covered her face. Harry took her in his arms and she wept for only a moment on his shoulder. Holding her in his arms it suddenly occurred to him.

“Gabriella, what if... when I get back to Hogwarts... you know... I could use the stone.” She pulled back looking at him blinking. She looked so tired and Harry wanted nothing more than to make her better... to make Soseh better. The vivificus stone was a tool for good, and he’d start as soon as he returned. Happiness wiped the tears from her eyes and she held him tight in her arms. “I’m sorry, Harry, but...”

“What’s this?” Ron asked, pointing to a television in the living room. Gabriella turned and flicked it on to reveal a parade in South Benton that was being covered by the local station. “A picture frame?” he asked.

“A television, Ron,” answered Harry. “It shows pictures of what’s going on around the world.” Ron’s eyes lit up.

“My dad’s always wanted to see one of these!” he exclaimed. “Can you make it look wherever you want?”

“No. There’s a guy like Colin taking pictures at the other end. He gets to pick what you watch.” Ron shook his head in disappointment taking a slice of cheese from the platter Soseh had prepared. They were all watching the tube, when Gabriella burst out.

“It’s Emma’s team!” The University track team was wearing heavy jackets in the snow, walking in a loose formation and waving at the crowd. She turned up the volume.

“Yes John,” a woman’s voice announced, “the team was extremely successful at the European Championship. Nearly a dozen members were selected to attend; three men and four women earned medals this year, including the first gold in the women’s 100 meter dash by Emma Slate.” Gabriella squealed. “They should return from Paris this afternoon, if Heathrow stays open.”

“Yes indeed, Mary,” a male voice answered back, as the team passed from view followed by a marching band. “Most airports around Great Britain are announcing delays. For more on the weather we turn to...” Gabriella turned down the volume.

“Did you hear that?” she radiated. “A gold medal!” Soseh stood with her hands twisting the back of the couch tightly as she stared at the television. Only Harry noticed, and his heart filled with sadness. He was sure he heard her mutter her son’s name.

Finally, they all migrated to the platter of food at the kitchen table and before long all four were assembling a puzzle of Big Ben. They were nearly done when for no reason Soseh stood up, walked over to the silent television that was now showing a commercial, and gripped the back of the couch once more.

“It can’t end like this?” Soseh questioned the television. “My sweet... can it?”

“Mama?” Gabriella asked standing and moving to join her. No sooner had she reached Soseh’s side, the television flashed SPECIAL REPORT. Harry and Ron both came over to see what was up. Gabriella turned up the volume.

“... your regular broadcast to bring you this special report. At approximately 4 pm, GMT, multiple explosions rocked the Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport. The airport was packed with holiday travelers and early reports have many dead and countless injured. Officials refuse to comment if this was another terrorist attack. Here is the first footage of the scene.”

The picture, taken from a helicopter flying overhead, showed three large pillars of smoke rising into the evening air. A tremendous blaze roared up from one location and the camera zoomed in. “What you’re seeing there, Bill, is, or was, Terminal 2D. Air France, Brit Air and Luxair all used that terminal for...” There was another huge explosion, the camera frame flashing white. “My god! Did you get that? It’s gone... it’s all gone.” The camera pulled back to show the entire length of the terminal engulfed in flames.

“Emma!” Gabriella breathed, squeezing Harry’s hand. “What airline was she flying, Harry?”

“I don’t know,” he replied dumbstruck. “Duncan never said.” The scene on the television changed to the front of the airport where

rescue workers were carrying the injured out of the building. In the same picture, policemen armed with rifles stormed into the building. It was utter chaos.

"I've got to call her mother!" She ran to the phone and quickly dialed. "Damn! It's busy!" Gabriella began to tremble and Harry went to console her.

"I'm sure she's fine, baby. She should have left there over an hour ago."

"Didn't you hear? They said delays! What if... what if..."

"She's fine. She's probably on the phone right now with her mum, that's all." Tears began to stream down Gabriella's eyes. She was having none of it.

"Don't you see, Harry?" she quietly moaned in anguish burying her head in Harry's neck. "She's never wrong. Mama's never wrong." Soseh, seemingly oblivious, returned to the kitchen and began washing some plates.

Ron, however, was transfixed with the television. His mind watching every detail, looking for any clue. "Why? Why would he do this?" he whispered. "They're innocents, for Merlin's sake." He turned to see Harry still holding Gabriella in his arms. "We need to go," he said with a tint of urgency in his voice. Harry looked at Ron as if he were a madman.

"You can't be serious?" he said, glaring through his glasses. Gabriella, however, heard something in the tone of Ron's words, wiped her tears from her face and walked over to the couch.

"Why, Ron?" she sniffed. "What is it?"

"The opening move, Gabriella," he explained turning back to the television. "King's Cross was the warm-up. This... this is his flashy, bloody murderous, opening move." Harry stood behind Gabriella and listened trying to follow Ron's thinking.

“Who’s he?” Gabriella asked. Ron shot Harry a glance, and Harry shook his head. Ron continued.

“The point is that he’s waiting for our counter move, and when we...” There was a knock on the door.

“That’s probably Emma and Duncan right now,” said Harry with hope in his voice as he went to answer the door. He pulled it open to find Fred standing on the stoop. For a moment, Harry just gaped, unable to say a word. “Er... come in, Fred.” The redhead stepped in through the door. There was no humor in his eyes. Instead, his face wore a look of worry and his hand remained in his pocket, where Harry knew his new wand lay.

Fred’s eyes surveyed the room before he fully entered. Ron seemed unsurprised. Gabriella looked to Harry for an explanation. Soseh, hummed quietly to herself as she continued to clean the kitchen. Ron narrowed his eyes at his brother, reading his thoughts, and then opened them wide.

“The Ministry!” Ron exclaimed. “Where’s dad?”

“I told you not to...”

“Where’s dad?” Ron yelled.

“He and Percy went to France. Half the Ministry’s there.”

“A feint,” said Ron, still trying to assemble the strategy in his mind. “Draw them to Paris, and attack the Ministry.” He grabbed his coat and slipped it on. “How many?”

“About three dozen rogue goblins,” Fred answered. “When I left, they’d already broken through the first defenses. Seems they brought a couple giants with them.”

“Goblins?” Harry asked. “What about...” he looked over his shoulder, but Soseh seemed oblivious as she arranged food in the icebox. “What about Death Eaters?” he whispered.

"Oh, no." Ron breathed not waiting for the answer. "Where's Dumbledore?" he asked excitedly.

"That's why I'm here." Fred turned to Harry as Gabriella reached for his arm. "Tonks finally convinced him to go to the hospital. He was admitted this afternoon for a check-up exam at St. Mungo's. It takes twelve hours to complete, and the Healer there says the test can't be interrupted. Something about a measure of his life force; stopping now could kill him." He stepped closer to Harry. "Before Dad left to France, he told me to come get you if there was any change."

"Change in what?" Harry asked.

"Change at Hogwarts," replied Fred. "Dumbledore's gone and now the two Aurors Dad had watching Hogwarts are fighting at the Ministry. Ron, hearing these words, assembled the moves and planned two ahead as if playing a game of wizard's chess.

"They're at Hogwarts, Harry," he said, seeing the strategy for what it was. "No students, only a handful of professors, and Dumbledore is gone. They want the school."

"The stone," said Gabriella in a clear voice. "Harry, do you think...?"

"We've got to find out," Harry said, reaching for his jacket. But Ron, the better chess player, grabbed his hand.

"Don't you think that's what he wants you to do? Come save the school? Harry, it's another trap." Harry shook his head.

"No, Ron, he wants something of mine, and he's gone to Hogwarts to take it from me." He grabbed his coat, and hastily put it on. He turned to Gabriella who was still trying to figure out who he was. "Baby, I've got to go find out if the stone is safe. I'll be back as soon..." Harry swallowed, losing the words in his throat. "I... I love you." They kissed as Gabriella stroked his face, her hand shaking. He began to follow Fred and Ron out the door, then turned back. It was odd he thought. They were to be eating a grand meal this evening, and Soseh hadn't even started cooking. Did she know? He took a deep breath. "Emma

will be fine. I know she will." He offered as best a smile as he could muster and closed the door behind him.

The snow had stopped falling, leaving behind about six inches of fresh powder. Harry looked to the darkening sky and found it still spotty with clouds. Already, Fred and Ron were calling for him to hurry, Ron insisting that the Death Eaters wanted Harry, not some stupid stone. When they entered the Dursley living room, Harry looked down to see Draco's scroll. Christmas greetings would have to wait, he thought. Right now they needed to go. The three stood at the hearth.

"Well," Ron began, "we can start at the new shop in Hogsmeade first, maybe fly from there, or we can try to jump straight to Hogwarts into Tonks' office."

"Hogsmeade," Harry answered without hesitation. "We need to know what we're walking into."

"Agreed," Ron nodded. "Hopefully nothing but Christmas cheer."

Brandishing his new wand, Fred started the fire and was first to go... "Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes of Hogsmeade!" Ron followed close behind. Harry, however, hesitated. He scanned the room regretting that he'd never taken the time to clean it. He felt as if, somehow, he was saying goodbye. For no reason, he grabbed Draco's scroll, shoved it in his jacket, and disappeared into a swirling flash of fire, only to reappear in Fred and George's new shop. Emerging from the ashes, he swiped the dust from off his coat sleeves.

"That's far enough, Mr. Potter," sneered a male's voice to Harry's right. He turned to find George out cold on the floor, Ron and Fred bound and gagged sitting next to him, and a cloaked figure pointing a wand straight at Harry. "And they said this would be difficult. Now, slowly, hand me your wand. We wouldn't want an accident now, would we?"

"Mahogany?" Harry said coolly. "It didn't serve you well when we met last in the Ministry, Mr. Nott." The Death Eater recoiled at his name.

“Taken down by a fifteen year-old witch. Tsk. Tsk,” Harry clucked his tongue.

“I’ve been waiting for this for a long time, Potter,” smirked Nott with a scratchy voice, raising his wand. Harry made no attempt to reach for his own. Instead he watched and waited. He remembered Tonks’ words earlier in the year. So he let his vision look for the smallest hint of what was to come. Nott seemed to be enjoying his upper hand, dropping his defenses ever so slightly. And then Harry heard the breath, a distinct inhale. Instantly, he reached for his wand at the pivot point of Nott’s concentration.

“Stupefy!”

“Protego!”

A beam of red light ricocheted straight back at the caster, and Nott flew backwards into the wall.

“Expelliarmus!” Harry called out, and Nott’s wand flew out of his hand. “Incarcerous.” Moments later, it was Nott who lay bound, while Ron and Fred were free. Rubbing his own right arm, Harry went to George’s aid just as he was coming to.

“George, you okay?” Harry asked. George reached and grabbed Harry’s jacket, and pulled himself up to a sitting position. His eyes seemed to float about in their sockets, and he was unable to clear his mind.

“Harry?” His voice was unsteady. “Nott, he’s...”

“Tied up at the moment, brother,” Fred cut in, handing George a green candy. “Go on, eat it.” George popped it in his mouth and immediately his eyes began to clear. Fred looked at Harry. “It’s the counter-candy to our new line of knock-out nougats.”

“Harry,” George said more clearly, standing to his feet. “They’re all over town waiting for you. They’ve got every fireplace covered.”

“Waiting for him?” Ron asked. “Harry, if they had wanted something from Hogwarts, they wouldn’t be waiting in ambush for you to arrive. They’d grab it and run. Let’s go.”

“Maybe,” Harry said looking out the front window of the shop. “We still have to be sure.”

“It’s a trap, Harry!” said Ron sternly. “There’s nothing at Hogwarts that’s worth...”

“I said we have to be sure!” snapped Harry. He wasn’t going to hide here and wait for Voldemort to take the stone. And if it was a trap, perhaps it was time for that too. He was ready to be done with it. “Fred, I need a broom.”

“You mean we need brooms,” corrected George. “Honestly, Harry, if you’re going to ruin the Queen’s English, you might just as well ship off to America.”

It wasn’t long before the four Gryffindors found themselves in the air above the frozen lake heading toward Hogwarts. The snow was deeper here, and as Harry looked up, he could see stars breaking through the clouds and Mars looming large, a brilliant bright red as it approached the full moon. Perhaps, tonight, Grigor would get his wish after all.

Chapter 47 - Lycanthropic Liberation

“Where is it?”

“I don’t know. We should see it by now.”

The three Weasley boys and Harry were flying fast and furious across the lake toward Hogwarts. Normally, the castle lights filled the skyline with a glow visible from even Hogsmeade. At Christmas the colour was yet more spectacular, drawing wizards and witches from around the country to take photographs. Now, halfway across the lake, the full moon and the brilliant red of the planet Mars covered with clouds, there was no sign of a castle.

“This is bad,” cried out Fred above the roar of the wind. “You can’t bloody vanish a whole castle... can you?”

“There’s Hagrid’s!” yelled Ron. The pinprick of light from the half-giant’s cabin set their bearings. They crossed, as near as they could tell, the lake’s edge. “That means the castle is over...” He immediately slowed his broom, and the others did likewise. Where the castle should be, there was darkness. The air had been cold, but suddenly it had turned frigid. Harry knew this feeling all too well.

“Dementors,” he hissed, as they each landed on the ground. “Wands ready!”

“It’s bad enough they ruined business for weeks after school started,” growled Fred, “but now they have to go and ruin my Christmas!” Slowly they walked toward the emptiness they could not see, but felt in their bones. George pointed slightly to their left.

“The castle has to be —” For a moment, the clouds opened, and the night’s full moon shone down like a giant spotlight from the heavens. “Merlin!” he gasped. Every flame was out on the castle and no light shone from within. Hovering about the castle walls and over its ramparts were Dementors, hundreds of Dementors, like flies searching for food. The boys scanned the windows, the parapets, the towers, and the castle grounds with the light available, but not another living thing stirred.

"The cabin," Ron offered. "There's light there." Harry nodded and they dashed down the hill. The windows were frosted over and inside nothing stirred. Without saying a word, Harry motioned to George to watch his back as he reached for the handle on the front door. Quickly, he pulled and it opened freely; the two plunged inside followed by Ron and Fred.

"Empty," said Ron. "They've taken him."

"Fang's gone," said Harry, looking behind the large couch. "They wouldn't take Fang; the dog's worthless, and Hagrid wouldn't take him to protect the castle." He shook his head. "This doesn't make sense."

"The Dementors may have come here first," answered Fred bleakly.

"Listen Harry," said George concerned and somehow feeling the responsible one, "I know we can all conjure a Patronus, and I know you're better at it than anybody in all England, but there are too many. We have to get help." Harry started to complain, but George held up his hand. "I'll fly back to Hogsmeade and Apparate to the Ministry. I don't know how many Death Eaters they have in Hogsmeade, but I'm sure it's enough to watch the likely floos. If we're lucky, someone's already gone for help. It'll only be ten, maybe twenty minutes; just stay here and we can do this together. Fred, make sure they stay put."

No one said another word as they watched George push off from Hagrid's stoop. He was flying low to the ground, speeding toward the lake's edge when a dark image seemed to sense his presence. Soon, a dozen or more Dementors were giving chase. There was a large flash of bright white light, and a Patronus in the shape of an enormous falcon burst forth from George's wand. The Dementors scattered and none continued the chase as he made his way over the lake toward Hogsmeade. Ron whooped a cheer. Harry grabbed Ron's mouth with his hand to silence him, but too late. The Dementors had sensed the joy and headed their way. Quickly, they ran back into Hagrid's cabin and locked both doors. An instant later, there was a thud at the window, and another on the back door. The

room was growing cold, as the very foundation of the cabin began to shake and Fred seemed to grow pail. Harry stoked the fire, his arm still aching from his duel with Nott.

“Ron!” Harry yelled out. “The cupboard, Hagrid keeps his chocolate in there!” Ron ran and got the chocolate, feeding it to all three. The cabin was affording them more protection than Harry thought it should. He heard no screams in his mind, no echoes of the past. Still, the roof rumbled violently, showering them in dust and debris.

“There’s got to be dozens of them out there!” yelled Ron over the rumbling, showing a hint of fear for the first time. “This cabin can’t hold out forever.” Harry looked at the front door, considering a frontal attack.

“No, Ron,” he breathed, “no it can’t, and we can’t wait for more. Grab the door!” Hesitantly, Ron nodded, drew his wand, and put his hand on the handle. Fred grabbed him by the arm.

“It’s suicide! The second we leave the building the whole lot of ‘em will be in our heads. We might get a few shots off, but that’ll be it.”

“In our heads...” whispered Harry quizzically, lowering his wand; an idea was forming. “Ron, can you —” Just then there was a loud howl that seemed to come from the back door. It was long and mournful, and the second it finished it was followed by another, this time higher in pitch and more from the front of Hagrid’s cabin.

“Oh, no! Not werewolves!” pleaded Ron to the air. He ran to the window and tried to wipe the frost from the inside pane. He was scraping away the ice with his coat sleeve when he recoiled in horror. Large red eyes glared back at him and then disappeared into the darkness. The air soon filled with howls, and the cabin gave a giant shudder, only to fall still. “I guess after the Dementors suck our souls out, we’ll make for a nice midnight snack!”

There was a long, low growl at the back door, and then a sudden large crash against the wood. If the cabin hadn’t been built for a half-giant, the wood would have splintered in two. In the distance, there was the sound of fighting as if two werewolves were tearing into

something, or someone. Then again at the back door, they heard a yelp, and the door crashed but did not yield.

"It won't take too many more hits like that," said Fred coolly. He raised his wand and a broad blast of white light infused itself in the wood. "That will help, but not forever." At the front another werewolf howled, this time low and in an almost commanding tone.

"Ron," Harry called, "can you see?"

"I can't see a bloody thing," Ron replied, looking out the frosted window again.

"No, I mean can you see with your mind? I think... Just focus to the front! Is anybody there?"

Ron walked to the front door, just as another large crash hit the back. He closed his eyes and reached for thoughts out beyond the wall. "Merlin!" he gasped. "Anger... they're mad... no, he's mad." Still closing his eyes he called out loudly, as another rumble shook the cabin. "It's like two minds, Harry! Wait, there's another —" A high howl pierced their ears from just beyond the door. "That's a woman! She's calling to attack." Ron turned and slumped to the floor, his back against the door, he said dejectedly, "Finish them off at the cabin!"

The front window shattered, and a pale, dead-looking hand wrapped in shreds of black cloth reached through. Instantly, the room filled with the horrid stench of death and decay. Harry raised his wand, readying it to get a better shot should the creature fully enter. "Not us..." Ron muttered, still slouched at the door. The Dementor placed its hooded head through the window, and drew in a sucking wind that turned the room cold. Harry summoned a happy thought and began his incantation just as the Dementor let out a piercing guttural scream. There was an enormous ripping sound, and black liquid flew from within the creature's hood onto the cabin floor. It slumped across the sill, and was dragged away to the sound of more tearing flesh and growls.

A moment later, another shriek came from the back of the cabin, and then another from the side. "They're feeding," said Ron, staring

blankly at Fred still standing guard at the back door. Soon the air was filled with shrieks the three boys now knew to be the rattling death cries of the Dementors. Gathering his strength and his bravery, Ron stood and placed his forehead against the front door. They waited and watched as the screams seemed to emanate further from the cabin. The rattling and crashing at the doors had stopped. "I count eight at least," said Ron, deep in concentration. Suddenly he turned to look at Harry, his eyes wide. "One's wondering why you're not using the Patronus it taught you!"

"Remus!" Harry exclaimed. "I'd know that howl anywhere." Even with a broken window, the air in the cabin had grown warmer. Harry stood on the couch to look out the window, realizing too late as he soaked his hand in the black ooze now on the sill. "Yehk," he spat. The clouds had covered the moon again, and all was dark. Another howl erupted from the momentary silence, followed quickly by multiple shrieks in the direction of the castle. Harry came back to his friends, wiping his hands with a large towel by the sink. "We need to get inside the castle!"

"Okay, I know he's Remus and all," cautioned Fred, "but a werewolf will slice open the guts of his own family and have them for breakfast as soon as not. He may want your Patronus, Harry, but that might be just to get more Dementors for snacks. I doubt the beasts are going to just let us stroll up to the front doors while they chomp on some more black robes."

"Maybe," said Ron, narrowing his eyes. "Maybe, if I could get close enough."

"Close enough!" shot Fred. "For what? Are you mad?"

"The walls here," Ron said keenly, "they're different somehow. If I can get outside, and move in close to one of the werewolves —"

"What?" yelled Fred. "Oh, I can see it now. Sorry, Mum, but it seemed like a smashing idea... little Ronnie sneaking up to talk to the cute little werewolves. Imagine my surprise when THEY ATE HIM!"

“I’m telling you he spoke to me!” Ron yelled back at Fred, and then turned to Harry for support. “At least I think he did.” Harry looked back at Ron hard. He knew, better than anyone, how adept Ron had become at probing the mind. They had shared each other’s thoughts, and Harry at least entertained the possibility, however remote, that Ron was capable of speaking to Remus the werewolf.

“How close?” he asked. Fred couldn’t believe his ears.

“Harry, you aren’t actually —”

“HOW CLOSE?”

Ron thought for a moment, rolling it over in his mind. He’d read the minds of humans from more than fifty feet away. “Twenty feet,” he confidently replied. The clouds broke open once again and the moon shone bright on the castle grounds. Harry walked over to the broken window. The castle still swarmed with Dementors, while the howls and fighting moved towards the west side, near the Quidditch pitch.

“They’re not going in,” Harry whispered. “They seem to be looking for a way, but can’t find it.” Seeing that Harry was actually considering the possibility, Fred walked over and took his arm.

“I’m not going to let my brother —”

“That’s not your decision, Fred,” Ron cut in, “and it’s not Harry’s. I have no intention of going out to be an appetizer. I’ll need the help of the best Beater in Hogwarts’ history though. If we do this right, we can pull them away from the front doors and give Harry a chance to get into the castle.”

“Ron —” Fred began.

“Listen!” Ron interrupted. “We can use our brooms. Last time I checked, werewolves can’t fly. We can hover over the top and see if I can get in to Remus’ mind and let him know what’s going on. When George arrives with help, we can’t have two allies attacking each other. Thing is, that’s just the first move. The Dementors are out in the thick of it with ‘em, and I’ll need you to keep them off me long

enough to connect.” Fred was hesitant, not so much for his own safety as his brother’s.

“Why the hell did you have to go and become a Legilimens for anyway,” Fred cursed defeated. “If we do this, we do it my way, and that means we leave when I say leave. Is that clear?”

“Yes, big brother,” said Ron, his lips hinting at a smile. He drew his wand and slowly opened the front door. Except for the screams in the distance, all was silent. The two Weasleys mounted their brooms as Harry sat low at the stoop of Hagrid’s cabin. Ron turned to his brother to reassure him about something Harry knew all along. “Don’t worry, Fred,” he said with eyes of steel. “I can do this.” Fred nodded, gripping Ron’s shoulder tight.

“Be quick, Harry,” he said. “If we can, we’ll retreat back to the cabin. And here,” he said, tossing Harry a blue-wrapped candy. “Nitro nougat,” he grinned. “You can chew ‘em for hours, but spit ‘em out and they explode. Won’t kill anybody, but it will knock ‘em off their feet.” For an instant, Ron and Harry held each other’s gaze. They’d been near death together before, but somehow this was different. They gave each other a slight nod, and in a flash the two Weasleys disappeared into the eerie glow of a reddened moonlight toward the pitch.

Harry sat down and closed his eyes. Pulling the thoughts from his mind, he cleared it from all happiness, all sadness, all pain, and all joy. If the Dementors needed to feed, they would not sense it in his overwrought emotions. When he refocused on the front castle doors, his mind was imbued with the single purpose of retrieving the vivificus stone. Slowly, he made his way up from Hagrid’s cabin. In the distance there was a loud howl, followed closely by a brilliant flash of white light that filled the sky. The Dementors swarming the castle seemed to migrate toward the commotion. It was as if a giant black scarf was slowly slipping off the castle to the west. There was another flash of light, and then a panoply of howls and screeches. Harry looked up toward the moon, and nearly had to shield his eyes. As they adjusted, he saw Mars glaring defiantly down on him as if Voldemort were a red-eyed Cyclops. It was, for a planetary star, enormous. Grigor was right, the sight was astronomically spectacular.

He wished he could be out on the front lawn of Pensley College this evening. It would not be long until Mars would appear to crash into the moon, only to reappear on the other side an hour after that.

The Dementors had, for now at least, vanished to the far side of the castle. It was now or never. He tried to blow warmth in his hands, took another breath, and then sprinted to the front doors. Expecting to find them locked, he found them open and he slipped in as quietly as he could manage only to find the front entranceway deserted. He ran to the Great Hall, assuming the students would gather there under the professors' protection, but it too was deserted. There was nothing, not a student or professor, not a ghost or even a cat. He had never seen the castle this quiet. Only the flicker of an occasional candle suggested that there was life of any sort. Then, in the silence, he heard a distant voice. It was calling out from the towers. Immediately, he ran to climb the staircases.

The moving steps rumbled under his feet as he ascended. Soon, it became clear that the sound was coming from the Gryffindor tower. There was a great blast, like the sound of a tremendous electric discharge that lasted for a few seconds then fell silent. Quickly, he ran down a corridor toward Gryffindor. The voice called out again, and though Harry was nearer its strength, the voice was weaker; so too was the sound of lightning that filled the air. He turned the final corner toward the portrait of the Fat Lady, and into a corridor of darkness and stench.

"Lumos!" he called out, gasping for breath. The ground was littered with the empty black cloaks of Dementors. Slowly, he moved forward toward the entrance. Again, the voice weakly hissed out to the darkness an incantation that Harry could not hear. There was a faint white discharge that lit up the end of the corridor. It was enough to let Harry see, and the picture it imprinted on his mind filled him with horror.

Dozens of black robes were piled all around as black ooze covered the floor. Sitting in the muck, her back to the portrait of the Fat Lady, was Professor McGonagall. Harry could see in her eyes a mixture of fear and defiance. Her hand, clutched around her wand, reminded Harry of Neville clutching a small paintbrush dripping with green paint.

Surrounding her were a dozen more Dementors, closing in. They were stooping close to her, but she had no more magic left to fight. Harry did not hesitate.

“Expecto Patronum!” he called high into the air. A stag erupted from his wand in a brilliant flash of white. It charged the Dementors, pushing them away from Professor McGonagall and into a corner of the corridor against the wall. They were trapped. Harry continued to focus his wand, and a continual stream of light kept him connected to the stag. The glowing white creature lowered its rack of antlers and plunged into the Dementors. They screamed as if being seared by a white hot poker. Harry repeated the spell. Another stag erupted to join its twin. It too lowered its head and plunged into the creatures. Professor McGonagall moved along the floor in the black slime toward Harry, but he paid her no heed. His mind was single focused. He recast the spell, just as one Dementor seemed to vanish through the wall in a withering cry, leaving behind nothing but a black cloak that fell into a puddle of black ooze on the floor. Another cried out and passed into nothingness. Again and again he summoned his Patronus, not to protect, but to kill. Soon, the room was as filled with screams as his heart was with rage. “Die!” his mind yelled out, but instead of screaming the word, his lips pursed and he blew a whistle. “No! Not now!” he thought, whistling the Hogwarts school song.

Two Dementors were trapped against the wall as the last Patronus crushed one into nothingness, leaving the other free. Harry tried to cast a spell, but only music left his lips. The remaining creature hesitated at first, and then swiftly moved toward Harry as he whistled. He began to feel cold and nauseous. He felt the rage being sucked from his body, and the whistling stopped. A new kind of scream began to fill his ears, and helpless, he fell to his knees, dropping his wand into the black goo. The Dementor leaned close, its rattling breath fogging Harry’s glasses. It reached its decaying hands to Harry’s face and pulled him closer. In that instant, a fire lit his fingertips and spread upward through his arm and into his mind.

“Don’t - touch me - you bloody beast!” He took his right hand and plunged it into the darkness of the Dementor’s hood, and grabbed hold of its coldness. The Dementor screeched, but Harry continued. “Siad Adumai!” he cried, uttering a spell he had never studied nor

read before. The coldness in his fingers grew warm, then hot, as the Dementor's body glowed red, then white, lifting off the ground and exploding like a Filibuster Firework releasing all of the light the creature had sucked out of the world, and leaving nothing behind but glowing embers that floated to the blackened floor.

Shaking, Harry knelt on the floor and stared into the darkness. A groan at his side broke the trance. Searching the slime with his hand, he found his wand and lit the candles in the corridor. There, prone on top of a pile of black rags from the Dementors she herself had destroyed, Professor McGonagall lay pale and gaunt, but still alive. Harry reached down to help her up, but she recoiled, brandishing her wand.

"Professor, it's me," he offered kindly, "Harry Potter."

"Harry," she whispered as if waking from a deep slumber. "You shouldn't... it's not safe. The others... they're..." She fainted to the floor. Harry looked up to the portrait of the Fat Lady still flecked with splatters of black blood. She, like the portraits about her, bore expressions of panic mixed with relief.

"Mumosum Splenda," said Harry, repeating the password he last knew.

"That is n-not the p-p-password," stammered the Fat Lady frightened. Harry reached down and scooped up a handful of black ooze, preparing to finger-paint if need be.

"Open... the... door!" he commanded, jaws clenched. The portrait opened.

Crying for help, Harry carried Professor McGonagall into the Gryffindor common room and set her on the couch by the fire. It was warm here, but still nobody answered his call. He scanned about for any sign of struggle, but save for the eerie absence of people, all seemed normal. He ran over to the cupboard and pulled down some chocolate candies, but Professor McGonagall still lay unconscious. He placed a small bit of chocolate in her mouth to let it dissolve, but

she was tired, far too drained to even swallow. He remembered the stone and dashed up the staircase to the boys' dormitory.

Entering his room, he found that nothing had changed. On his desk was the stone of cinnabar resting in the mouth of the dragonhead just as he had left it. But, where was everyone? Quickly he ran to his trunk, grabbed his bag, and started filling it with his most precious items. When he came to the Marauder's Map, he opened it, swore his oath, and looked to see who might still be in the castle. There, in Gryffindor tower, were the names of Professor McGonagall and Harry Potter, but no others appeared. Gone were the clusters of names that always gathered in the four houses, the library and the Great Hall. Harry re-centered the map to outside the castle walls on the pitch and found to his relief Fred, Ron, Remus and other names he didn't recognize. "Werewolves," Harry thought to himself. If not for the Dementors swarming the castle and attacking the entrance to Gryffindor, he would have thought the school closed. It didn't make sense, but he didn't have time to figure it out.

He tossed the map in his bag, stood up and reached for the stone. He hesitated. There wasn't time, but he had to. "Hang on, Ron," he whispered. Pulling his wand he sent a blast of fire into the stone and pricked his finger letting his blood enter the Heart of Asha. Again, all went blank, as Harry found himself being pulled into the ball. The white expanse waited for his next command. "Professor McGonagall," he concentrated. There was a whirl of colour and he found himself downstairs, looking at her on the couch in the common room, the fire's flame frozen in time. "Heal her," his mind echoed to the scene before him. The colours swirled and a blast of light plunged into McGonagall's chest, but not nearly as dramatically as it had with Dumbledore. For an instant, her eyes opened, then closed, and with them the scene went black.

This time when Harry came to, he was still standing, the ball in his hand hanging at his side. He was a bit dizzy, but the nausea quickly faded. He put the dragonhead and ball in his bag and ran downstairs. He had expected to see her up walking around. Instead, she was still prone on the couch. He knelt at her side and held her hand. It was warm. The colour in her face had returned, and she looked as if she was in a deep and pleasant sleep.

"Professor," he whispered, trying to wake her. But she wouldn't rouse. After a few more attempts, he decided it best to let her rest.

As he stepped out the portrait of the Fat Lady, his foot slipped on a slimy black rag. "Filch is going to have a fit," he grimaced, looking at the death and destruction around him. He moved as quickly as he dared down the staircases, trying to sense the possible approach of more Dementors, but none came. Except for Professor McGonagall in the Gryffindor common room, he was sure the castle was dark and deserted. He wondered how long his time with the stone had taken, hoping that time had passed as it had when Goyle was watching. When he finally made it to the entranceway, he paused trying to catch his breath. He stood close to the front doors and attempted to sense the cold of the Dementors that might have returned, but again he felt nothing. Perhaps Ron and Fred had been victorious, or perhaps they were having their souls sucked dry at this very moment. Unwilling to take chances, Harry held his wand high, preparing to fight the Dementors outside as he pushed open the great front doors.

Slowly, the doors creaked opened, pushing against the now drifting snow. The night was filled with an eerie reddish glow making the snow seem bloodlike. As the door fully opened, his heart sank seeing them there waiting--at least a dozen black figures only yards away.

"Expecto Patronum!" he commanded, and the giant stag once again appeared blasting into the cloaked gathering. But instead of scattering them, it slipped through them only to charge off into the distance. In the silence, there were a couple of stilted claps.

"Expelliarmus!"

Harry's wand flew from his hand. He squinted into the darkness trying to make out his foe, and realized too late... Death Eaters.

"Very good, Mr. Potter," came an all too familiar drawl from behind the black hood of the Death Eater standing to the fore. At his side was another cloaked figure with a black cloak, but wearing a blood-red hood. He stood no taller than Harry and was half a step behind the lead Death Eater. Scattered behind them was another dozen

Death Eaters, a few of smaller stature and wearing red hoods. "Did you use the stag to rid the castle of the Dementors? I thought we'd summoned more. Pity, really." He stepped forward. "We thought we would have to break inside and retrieve you ourselves, and the castle was being very uncooperative. Only a few of our friends slipped in before it sealed itself tight. Interestingly, even one of your classmates was unable to open the doors." He turned to the short Death Eater at his side. "My associates were ready to give up, and here you are. Just as the Dark Lord predicted!" The last sentence was particularly stern and menacing, clearly directed at those whose courage was failing.

The gathering of black cloaks began to form a half ring around Harry, blocking his escape in any direction. The thought of returning back through the doors crossed his mind when the lead Death Eater shot a beam of blue light, sealing them. He took another step forward with a small black box in his hand.

"Now, Mr. Potter," he sneered, "if you will give me your hand. As much as I would like to take your life, here and now, I've been asked to save that special pleasure for another." Harry stepped back, running into the closed door behind him. The scene caused a cacophony of laughter from the Death Eaters behind their leader.

"Not so brave now! Is he, Lucius?" a dim-witted voice called from the back of the crowd. A voice, Harry thought, could only be Mr. Crabbe.

"Fool!" Malfoy spat, sending a shot of red light and knocking his fellow Death Eater on his back. Menacingly he turned back to Harry. "Now, Mr. Potter, give me your hand." His words were dripping with hatred. Then, a voice cackled out from Harry's left, catching him off guard.

"You're the fool, Malfoy," she screeched. "Quit playing the secret aristocrat, grab the boy's arm, and be done with it!"

"Bellatrix!" Harry seared through clenched teeth. From deep within, a rolling hatred welled up inside him. Like volcanic lava erupting from his soul, his mind exploded in anger. His hands began to shake, as the rage consumed him. He'd destroyed the Dementors and now, he was prepared to destroy again. There would be no caring heart

tonight. She would finally die. He held out his right hand, ready to kill.
And... began to whistle.

Chapter 48 - Demonstration in Kind

It was a strange scene, really. Harry, filled with fury, at the front stoop of Hogwarts Castle, snow billowing onto the tops of his boots, a faint red hue cast by the fiery planet Mars above. There was no other light save for the great spotlight of the full moon. The air was bitterly cold and, as Harry whistled a tune he didn't even know, a blast of steam shot from his lips. The tune disappeared with the vapors into an odd silence, and his audience, a dozen Death Eaters and their red-hooded apprentices, burst into laughter, some even applauding. Harry looked to the sky just as Mars appeared to crash into the moon in a grand celestial optical illusion. He half expected it to explode as he nonchalantly slipped his hand into the pocket of his jacket.

"Very pleasant, Mr. Potter," Lucius snickered. "Wagner, I believe?" The red hue of the grounds grew bright then faded to white, and everyone seemed to follow Harry's glance instinctively looking to the sky. In that instant Harry quickly pulled a candy from his pocket, popped it in his mouth, and started to chew.

"Enough of this rot!" spat Lestrage. Quickly she strode up to Harry. "Give me your arm, boy!" She grabbed him by the left elbow. Harry had wanted nothing more than to see her die, but when she took his arm all he could do was muster another whistle. The movement of his lips, however, was quite natural and instead of blowing a note, he blew the candy directly at the black mask in front of him.

The explosion knocked Harry backward against the door, and shot Bellatrix head over heels down the steps, bowling over a half-dozen fellow Death Eaters in her path. Those nearest the pair had been blasted backwards and the others seemed dazed. Harry didn't hesitate as his hate gave way to necessity.

"Accio wand!" It snapped into his fingers. "Attonitu!" he called forcefully, using a spell he'd heard Goyle incant at DA meetings to blast a stunner at a group of adversaries all at once. It worked. Not as focused and lasting as a single beam, the enormous blast of red light blew all that were left standing to the ground. He ran down the castle steps three at a time, tumbling as he reached the bottom. Searing pain shot through his arm and he instinctively jumped to the right as a

blast of red light shot over his left shoulder. He could hear their footsteps behind as he ran steadfast toward Hagrid's cabin. There was another blast, and this one hit him square. His legs gave out below him. He tried to stand, but was unable. He countered the Jelly-Legs jinx and stood to one knee just as a Death Eater took him by the arm.

"I've got him!" he called with a grin that Harry couldn't see, and one he'd never use again. For Harry, using a move that Gabriella had taught him, plunged his right elbow backward into the Death Eater's mask cracking tooth and bone. The man screamed reaching for his face. Harry turned to escape, only to realize the delay had cost him his advantage--he was surrounded again. Exhausted, he fell to his knees. Suddenly, there was a sparkle of blue light from behind one of the smaller red-hooded Death Eaters. In the cluster of cloaks, barely noticeable, a house elf had just materialized.

"The elves stand silently no more!" he cried out. A few hoods turned in his direction.

"Caesar?" Harry whispered, remembering the house elf he'd met in the kitchens while searching for Dobby. No sooner had the words left his lips than another sparkle appeared to his right, and then another directly in front of him. Soon some thirty to forty house elves had appeared from nowhere. Collectively, the Death Eaters began to disperse and back away. All but one.

"This is ridiculous!" she cried out. "They're ruddy house elves! Kill them! Kill them all!" She cast a beam of green light directly at the house elf in front of Harry. But he vanished and the light struck the ground leaving a large crater where he once stood. In return, Caesar threw a ball of white light at Bellatrix, which she easily parried with her wand. But then there was another, and another. Soon the air was filled with white balls of lightning flying at black cloaks, the occasional blast striking true. It was evident that the Death Eaters had a fight on their hands, a fight they hadn't prepared for. Caesar hurried to Harry's side.

“Run, Harry Potter, sir! The magic of the elves is strong, but will not last. Run!” A house elf was hit and flew through the air landing at Harry’s feet, its eyes open and blank.

“Run!” cried Caesar again.

But instead of running, Harry placed his hands on the house elf and closed his eyes. He’d just charged the stone and could still sense the power of the Heart of Asha within him. The sounds of the battle raging around him slipped into silence, as he saw the flickering light of the house elf’s soul begin to wane. With his mind, Harry reached out toward the ball of energy and took it in his grasp. He could feel the energy flow out of him as the flickering light grew bright. Harry fell backward into the snow, the house elf beside him heaving in a new born breath. Caesar stared in amazement. An instant later, Caesar’s wide eyes narrowed as he turned to his opponents with an unimaginable fury. He cried out as the air filled with a tremendous blast of light. Harry heard a number of Death Eaters scream in pain, one of the screams was familiar.

“Draco?” Harry whispered, turning toward the sound.

“Run!” Caesar commanded. This time Harry looked up at the sky, the full moon staring down on him. The stars seemed to spin on a giant turntable, but for the first time in a long time there was no red eye threatening him from above. Taking in a deep breath he flipped to balance on all fours, a wave of dizziness passing over him. He took to knee, and then foot, and soon he was running toward Hagrid’s cabin.

“Don’t let him get away!” Bellatrix cackled from behind. “Lucius! Don’t —” Another blast filled the air cutting her words short. Harry was only fifty yards from the cabin when he knew. A deepening cold filled him from the inside. The Dementors had returned. They swarmed the battlefield like buzzards, blocking out the moon. He was already weak and he stumbled into a pile of snow, his face cold and wet. He turned onto his back and, his hand shaking, held his wand into the air.

“Expect-to... Expecto P-P-P...” he fumbled. His hand dropped in the snow. He needed help. He couldn’t do this on his own. He struggled

to bring his head up, only to see that the house elves were beginning to lose the battle at the castle steps. "I've failed," he whispered.

A hideous black figure swooped down close, and once again echoes of long forgotten screams began to fill Harry's mind. Screams? Or... howls? The creature's decaying hand reached for Harry's face, so close Harry could smell the stench of decay, and then with a thud it vanished in a flash of fur. A large light-brown werewolf had pounced, pinning the Dementor in the snow and tearing at its flesh. There was another howl directly behind Harry. He turned to see an even larger werewolf, white with stained jowls, walking toward Harry as if he were the next snack. Then in the air some thirty feet off the ground he saw Ron hovering. The white werewolf pounced toward Harry and then bounded by in a sprint to the castle steps.

"Run to the forest!" yelled Ron, his voice pitched high. He looked exhausted, but his face shone with determination.

"Where's Fred?" Harry yelled back, but Ron was gone, tracking the white werewolf toward the castle. In the glow of the moon, Harry saw some seven werewolves follow Remus and the white werewolf toward the castle. Not wishing to take a chance that Ron would lose control, Harry began as best he could to run. Racing, falling, racing to the forest, he had just passed Hagrid's cabin when a voice from high over his left shoulder called out.

"Harry!" He knew instantly it was Hermione.

Spinning around he looked up to see her flying on a broom, holding on to George's waist. Behind them were another dozen or so brooms. The sense of hope instantly filled Harry's heart. Flying in lead was Mr. Weasley, and on his right was Mr. Fudge. To Harry's surprise there was a mix of adults and students including Gryffindor's head boy, Lloyd Wade. Other than Mr. Weasley, he saw no members of the Order that he knew. What seemed most odd was the sight of Colin Creevey. He was riding an old Comet with one hand and holding his camera in the other. As the group passed over Hagrid's cabin, they pivoted toward the castle. Harry had never seen Mr. Weasley fly a broom, but as he turned toward the raging battle he moved with a

grace worthy of any Chaser. While most of the formation moved to the battle, Hermione, George and Colin landed next to Harry.

“We’ve got to get you to the forest!” George called out, just as Colin’s camera flashed in Harry’s face. “Where are Ron and Fred?” A blast of red light erupted at the steps sending a werewolf flying through the air and landing with a yelp.

“I don’t know where Fred is,” Harry answered trying to regain some semblance of cogent thought. “Ron... Ron’s leading the werewolves.” He pointed to a small figure hovering over the fray. In the same instant, beams of red showered down from the wizards riding brooms.

“Is he mad?” George screamed remounting his broom. “Hermione, get Harry to the caverns. He’s the one they’re after. You know the way.” George was about to push off when Colin grabbed his arm.

“I’m going with you,” he said with a calm and commanding voice. It was a tone, Harry had never really heard in the younger Gryffindor. He seemed so much older than Harry remembered. George rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“We’ve been over this, Colin. You’re not to —”

“I’ve got to record this, George,” interrupted Colin. “We need to have proof, and I intend to get it.”

“Then you better take your bloody pictures fast, because I’m not waiting around to see if they say cheese.” Colin mounted his broom, camera in hand, and together with George flew to the battle. Harry suddenly felt the urge to join and stepped toward the steps, but Hermione held him back.

“That’s just what they’re after, Harry. Merlin, look at you! A stiff wind would knock you over. Come on, you’ve got to follow me. It’s not too far in.” She began to run toward the Forbidden Forest, and Harry followed at her side.

“Where... are we... going?” asked Harry, gasping for air. His body was reaching its limits. It wouldn’t be long before he could go no

further. There was a swoosh from behind, and Harry turned brandishing his wand only to see Ron nearly fly him over as he dashed into some lower hanging branches in the thickening forest. If Harry was near the end of his rope, Ron had fallen off. He landed hard on the ground, his face white, and his hands still tightly clutching his broom. Even in the darkness, Harry noticed a thickening extension of the scar that wound its way about Ron's ear.

"Ron!" Hermione cried. She ran to his side and sat him up. His eyes wore a glassy gaze as Hermione held him in her arms and stroked his hair. "Baby, are you all right?" The haze seemed to lift from Ron's eyes as he looked back at her. Realizing who was in front of him, he quickly wrapped his arms around her kissing her neck.

"Tired is all," he whispered weakly, with the faintest smile. Their foreheads touched and then they gently kissed -- clearly not their first.

It was odd seeing his two best friends embrace each other with a passion he had never seen. He couldn't ever remember Ron so much as touching Hermione, and yet it seemed so perfect. Another howl filled the night air, followed by a scream not of a Dementor, but of a human. The baleful note seemed far closer than it should have been.

"Er... this is beautiful and all, but, Hermione..." Harry beckoned. Hermione, still holding tight to Ron, looked up. Even in the filtered moonlight striking the forest floor Harry could tell she was embarrassed.

"Oh, yeah, right. Erm..." she said standing and brushing the snow from her knees. It was as if she'd left the planet for a moment, oblivious to what was happening around them and had just returned. Harry reached down and helped Ron to his feet. "We were just —"

"I know," said Harry, saving her the explanation. "Ron told me. I think it's brilliant," he said with a smile, and with his acceptance a tremendous relief passed over Hermione who returned the smile. Then, suddenly realizing their predicament, she grabbed Ron's hand.

"Come on! This way!" She darted deeper into the forest, Ron and Harry in tow.

“Ron, where’s Fred?” asked Harry, barely able to keep up the pace.

“He should be here already,” said Ron over his shoulder.

“Where’s here?”

“Here is here,” Hermione answered coming to a stop. The forest had thickened, and they were standing at a large outcropping of rocks some thirty feet high that extended as far as he could see in any direction. Harry had traveled this path into the forest before and he didn’t remember such a wall. Looking at the manner in which Hermione was surveying the craggy face, he thought she was going to have them climb over it. Instead, she pulled her wand and pointed it at one of the stones.

“Norbert,” said Hermione, and the rock wall began to rumble. A small fissure appeared on the wall’s face into which Hermione stepped and disappeared. Ron went next, then Harry. It was just barely large enough for him to squeeze through, the frames of his glasses scraping against rock. He was nearly in when he felt his hand catch on something from the outside.

“Ouch!” he yelped jerking his hand inward, losing his balance and falling to the earthen ground of the cavern.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, brandishing her wand, and distracted by his cry. Harry looked down at his left hand which was now dripping blood. By the light of torches evenly spaced about the cavern wall, he could see his index finger was gashed.

“Must have caught it on the rock,” he winced as the crevice closed behind him. Hermione knelt down and bathed it in blue light, and the wound slowly sealed.

“That was pretty bad, Harry,” she said helping him to his feet. “You’d better let Madame Guérir have a look when we get in.” When Harry stood, he finally had a chance to take in his surroundings.

They were in a great stone tunnel, if it could be called that. Spanning at least fifteen feet across it was some twelve feet high. The torches revealed the passageway gradually sloping down and turning to the right. Harry touched the damp walls, and found them stone. The floor was rock as well, but had been layered with dirt and debris like the entryway of a Hagrid's cabin. Harry also noticed snow, tracks of snow that seemed to be recent. More than a few had been this way in the last few hours.

"Come on," said Hermione, with a voice that had noticeably lightened now that they were safe. "Follow me."

"You like saying that, don't you?" Ron poked.

"I don't often get the chance," she said, grinning. "And when I do, you don't often listen."

"Like I didn't follow you all around Hogsmeade looking for 'just the perfect blouse,'" Ron whined mimicking her voice. He was trying to start a fight, but his heart, or energy, just wasn't in it.

The path turned left, when Hermione suddenly stopped. She pulled her wand pointing it at the empty tunnel ahead. "Selectra!" Where once had been emptiness, a giant spinning tumbler appeared before them. Hermione dialed in a number to the left, then right, then left again, and the tunnel flashed bright blue, and seemed to spin. When it stopped they were in a grand cavern some fifty feet high and one hundred feet wide. It was as if they'd been moved by some magical elevator. More tunnels shot off in multiple directions, but they stepped into the grand cavern. There was furniture here, and in the far corner the Wireless Wizarding Network was broadcasting information about the attack on the Ministry and at De Gaul Airport in France, only no one was watching.

"What is this place?" Harry whispered in amazement. The words had just left his lips when he noticed movement about the entrance of one of the tunnels. He began to raise his wand when Hermione held his arm. There, hiding behind a barricade, was a group of about a dozen students, wands at the ready. When the hiding students realized who

it was and that it was safe, relief spread over all their faces. Anthony Goldstein was first to emerge.

“Well, I figured you to be a soulless zombie by now,” Anthony shouted out to Harry. The other students followed Anthony, who was smiling broadly, across the cavern chamber to meet the three newcomers. But as he came close to Harry the grand look of confidence left his face and was replaced with a look of concern. He leaned toward Harry’s ear. “When Fred came and told us you’d gone into the castle, I thought for sure...” his voice trailed off as he shook his head. Harry held out his hand, and Anthony took it pulling him close. “Thank Merlin you’re okay. The first years are pretty scared.” Anthony took a deep breath and turned wearing a broad smile again. “See!” he called. “I told you he’d be fine.” All their moods seemed to brighten.

“Fred,” asked Ron, “where’s Fred?” At the question, Anthony’s face turned a bit ashen.

“He’s with Madame Guérir down at the medical ward.” There was something more, but Anthony did not say what it was. Ron, however, heard what Anthony was thinking.

“That’s not possible!” he yelled. Ron spun, frantically looking at his options. “Hermione, which way?” She pointed to a tunnel leading to the right and he began to run. At this point, Harry didn’t feel much like running. He’d been looking lustfully at one of the couches in the great antechamber. His body ached, his head was numb, but he ran knowing Ron would do the same for him.

Thankfully, the stone passageway to the medical ward was short. After only a minute they arrived at a large white door emblazoned with a red staff and serpent--the Caduceus. Ron pushed in first. The ward, to Harry’s surprise, was large, larger in fact than the hospital wing at Hogwarts. There was row after row of empty beds, except for one in the distant back. There stood Madame Guérir speaking with Professor Flitwick, their faces grim. On the bed next to them sat Fred. His shirt was off, and except for looking a bit pale, he seemed fine. When they came closer, Harry could see that Fred’s left arm was bandaged. Ron was at his side in an instant.

"Hello little brother!" said Fred with a smile. "Harry! I told them you'd make it," he said, pointing at Madame Guérir and Professor Flitwick with his good hand. The two adults seemed caught between shock and amazement. "Ron, I think I'm done here. Hand me my shirt." He pointed at a blue button down shirt set out on the back of a chair. It was stained in blood, the left arm shredded.

"Tell me it's not true!" Ron yelled almost in tears. Fred's smile flickered for an instant then came back full. Harry and Hermione stood confused. Clearly, they had missed something. Fred put his hand on Ron's shoulder.

"It's not so bad, Ronnie. Although, I'm not sure how George is going to take it. Being the most handsome, I've always been sort of the face man for the store. He likes working the numbers and coming up with the great ideas. In fact —"

"This isn't about the bloody store!" interrupted Ron. "It's about you! You were right. It was bloody insane. How could I have been so stupid?" Ron buckled over onto the bed and began pounding it with his fist. Fred stood up and grabbed his brother.

"Hold it right there!" he snapped. "It was a bloody brilliant idea, and don't you ever... EVER blame yourself for this." He held up his right arm. "We're all here, and we're all alive." He turned to Harry. "Did you get it?" Harry patted the pack hanging from his shoulder and nodded. "There, you see! Success!"

Ron wiped tears from his face and then wrapped Fred in his arms. Suddenly, Hermione gasped, the blood draining from her face as she held her hand to her mouth.

"You were bitten," she whispered through her fingers. Fred grabbed his shredded shirt and held it up in the light.

"Tore up, more like it." He waved his wand, muttered a spell, and the shirt was like new. Even Professor Flitwick was surprised by the display of magic, but instead of speaking to Fred, he turned to Harry.

“Mr. Potter,” he interjected, trying to find a way into their difficult conversation with an even more difficult question. “You were in the castle?” Harry nodded. “Professor McGonagall... she was just leaving the castle into the catacombs when we had the cave-in. An errant blast from my wand I’m afraid.” He paused. “Did you... see her?”

“Her and about a hundred Dementors,” Harry answered excitedly. Everyone’s eyes widened at the tale Harry told, not too unlike the real story. “She was brilliant! She took them all out at the entrance to Gryffindor tower. A hundred black guts splayed out on the floor. Now I know why she’s the House Mistress of Gryffindor! She was sleeping in the common room when I left.”

“Sleeping!” exclaimed Professor Flitwick almost scandalized. “We’re in the midst of one of the greatest battles of our time, and she’s sleeping!”

“Well, she was pretty tired,” said Harry almost smirking. “A hundred Dementors and all.” Professor Flitwick considered this for a moment, and nodded his head in satisfaction.

“At least she’s safe,” Professor Flitwick muttered turning again to Fred, now dressed and brandishing his wand.

“I’m going back out there,” said Fred earnestly. Ron and Madame Guérir began to object simultaneously and Fred held up his hand to silence them. “It’s my last night to see a full moon and remember it as something beautiful to behold. Besides, Merlin only knows what sort of trouble George has gotten himself into again.”

“Then I’m going with you!” exclaimed Ron.

“No you’re not!” Hermione shot back emphatically. “You can barely walk, Ron. And your... your...” she simply stared at the deep red scar now winding its way about Ron’s ear. It seemed to have thickened since Harry first noticed. “You’re not going anywhere!” Harry was glad that Hermione had taken a stand. The room was starting to spin a little, and he didn’t think he could say no if Ron asked him to go along. Instead Ron, somewhere between fatigue and exhaustion, gave in.

“Be careful,” he said to his brother, who flashed him a smile. Fred patted his younger brother on the cheek, and left the hospital ward.

Harry suddenly felt the floor give out from under his feet, and everything went black. What felt like a moment later, he opened his eyes and found himself in one of the ward’s beds. Lying in the bed next to him, Ron was asleep on his stomach. His shirt was off, and Madame Guérir stood over him with her wand bathing his back in an orange light. The scars that had been diminishing over the last many weeks were once again raised and red.

“Is he going to be okay?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” said Madame Guérir simply. “Madame Pomfrey has been treating these scars and she is away for the holiday. This...” she pointed at the twisted, branching scars that spread out across Ron’s back, “this is new to me.”

Harry sat up, his head much clearer. He expected to see Hermione sitting nearby, but except for its two patients and the healer, the ward was empty. “Where’s Hermione?” he asked.

“She and Professor Flitwick went to help clear the cave-in,” she said, shaking her head. “A nasty mess that’s going to be. And to trust it to a giant.” Madame Guérir sighed heavily.

Harry sat up and rubbed his face. His head didn’t ache, and he seemed to feel much better. Picking up his glasses he stood on the floor.

“No, no, no,” Madame Guérir chided. “Back in bed.”

“Where’s the cave-in?”

“Mr. Potter, you will get back in your —”

“People are dying above our heads because of me!” Harry yelled. “WHERE’S THE CAVE-IN?” Madame Guérir looked deeply into Harry’s green eyes. She found anger, and fear, and sadness. But she

also saw bravery, and determination, and loyalty. The corners of her lips turned upward into the faintest hint of a smile.

“Go to the antechamber and look for the largest tunnel.”

Harry nodded and started for the door. “Madame Guérir, take care of him, okay? He saved my life tonight.” She gave Harry a wink, and turned back to her patient.

Harry wound his way down the tunnel to the antechamber. When he arrived he found most the students had gathered around the Wireless. Anthony saw Harry walk in and beckoned him over.

“They’re talking about Hogwarts, and they’ve got pictures,” he said in a very concerned voice. The Wireless projected the images in the air, much like the three-dimensional projection Harry has seen in the Marauder’s Eye. “How, in Merlin’s name, did they get pictures?” Anthony asked to the air.

“Colin,” Harry whispered to himself, staring at the sight before them. There were two images being sent over the Wireless. Both were taken about the castle steps. One showed a great white werewolf pinning a Dementor down to the ground, tearing at its throat. The site was grisly and many of the younger students screamed. The second shot was of a Death Eater, a bolt of green emanating from his wand. The curse was aimed at a wizard on a broom, but no one could tell who. What the students did see was that the spell hit its target. The wizard, whoever he was, fell from his broom and out of the frame of the photo. A shiver ran down Harry’s spine, and he suddenly felt very cold. He turned away looking for the tunnel leading to Hermione.

“They’ve sent more wizards from France,” said Anthony encouragingly. “They’ll have the Death Eaters cleared out before long.”

“But at what price?” Harry asked. He put his hands in the pockets and realized he still had Draco’s parchment. “Bloody traitor,” Harry whispered to himself, his fingers curling around the paper and crushing it. Then he turned to Anthony. “Is that the way to the cave-

in?" He pointed at the largest tunnel opening into the antechamber. Anthony nodded.

"It's a few hundred yards down, Harry. Stay to the left, and stay away from the giant."

"Giant?" Harry asked.

"You'll see," Anthony answered, rolling his eyes in his head. Suddenly one of the first years called out.

"We've won! They're fleeing!"

Both Harry and Anthony turned back to the Wireless. A reporter was declaring victory at Hogwarts. All Dementors had been killed, fled, or been captured, and nearly a dozen Death Eaters, or their apprentices, had been apprehended. "A record outing for Arthur Weasley," asserted the reporter. The news then turned to activities at the Ministry, and Harry's attention waned. It sounded as if the goblins too had been taken care of.

"It's over," Anthony breathed in a sigh of relief. Harry nodded, relaxing somewhat, but the chill in his bones remained.

Slowly, Harry made his way toward the cave-in. The tunnel entrance was much larger than the others, but it narrowed a bit as it wound its way toward the castle. Nonetheless, even at its narrowest the ceiling was some eighteen feet from the floor. For some reason there were fewer torches here lighting the walls and, feeling uneasy, he reached for his wand instead grabbing Draco's parchment. Seething, he pulled the crushed paper from his pocket. "How could you, Draco?" he hissed under his breath. He glared at the outside of the parchment, and fell against the stone wall. "I trusted you. I thought..." He made to rip the parchment to shreds, but stopped. Breaking the wax seal of the Malfoy crest, Harry opened the parchment. It was no holiday greeting.

King Potter,

I know spending another Christmas at Gryffindor brightens your miserable life, but I thought it time for another demonstration. When Christmas Eve arrives and you feel the need to join me for a smoke under our favorite tree, don't. The pieces are in motion; Weasles will understand.

DM

"A warning," Harry whispered. The Death Eaters thought Harry was staying at Hogwarts again for Christmas, or had Draco told them that? If the note in Harry's hand had been intercepted, they might have read it as a warning too. It could have meant Draco's life. Harry held the parchment up to one of the torches and watched it burn and turn to ashes. Harry shook his head. Once again, he had made a royal mess of things. He looked up at the stone ceiling. How many had died because he was too stupid to realize that Draco would never send him a note unless it was important. How many times had Draco reiterated their need to maintain the charade of their animosity? And then he sends a Christmas card?

Harry was cursing himself when he heard rumblings from further down the tunnel and the earth shook beneath his feet. Dust fell from the ceiling covering Harry's glasses with a thin film. He pulled them off to wipe them with the tale of his shirt, when his mind turned to giants. He wondered if maybe —

Suddenly, the fingers of his right hand clenched in a fist about his glasses, bending the frame as a searing pain shot up his shoulder and into his neck. He spun to look behind when he saw them appear from nowhere. In a blurred haze stood a tall man in a black cloak, his hood shredded away to reveal his long white hair. Next to him was a shorter figure, his left hand grasping at the red hood on his head. This time Harry was ready. He dropped his crumpled glasses to the floor, and in a sweeping motion pulled his wand as Lucius Malfoy began his spell.

"Expelliarmus!"

“Protego!” Harry called out, and the spell ricocheted back and struck Lucius, his wand flying backward. The figure in the red hood sent a shot of red light, missing Harry wide to the right and striking the wall in a loud explosion. Deliberate, Harry thought, just as the shards of rock struck him from behind. The pain was unexpected, and he lost concentration long enough for Malfoy to regain his wand. The quarters were tight, tighter than Malfoy was comfortable with.

“Let’s not bring the rocks down on top of us, Potter,” said Lucius mustering his kindest drawl possible. “The Dark Lord is not going to kill you. He just wants to... talk.” They began to circle each other like wrestlers in the ring, the smaller wizard two steps behind Malfoy. “Frankly, I don’t see what he sees in you, and I don’t care.” There was a tinge of anger mixed with frustration in Malfoy’s words. It was clear that Lucius Malfoy had the same thoughts as Severus Snape in this regard.

“Oh, we’ve already spoken,” lied Harry flatly. “Didn’t he tell you? You are his left-hand man, aren’t you? He wants me to be his second in command instead, and I said no.” The words raised an eyebrow, but nothing more. Lucius was far too experienced to show his cards with his face.

“Then I guess I’ll have to persuade you to come along civilly,” he said smoothly. In a blink, a blast of red was streaming toward Harry’s chest. But, just as quickly, he parried it sending the energy into the wall, and showering them in another blast of stone. A gash appeared on Lucius’ face. Even without his glasses Harry could see the dripping red against Malfoy’s pale white skin. He could also see the anger in his eyes as he roughly wiped the blood with his sleeve. The smaller wizard in the blood-red cloak, still followed Lucius like a shadow, and said nothing.

Lucius sent out another stunner, and again Harry deflected it. What he wasn’t ready for was the blast of white light streaming from the other wizard’s wand. It hit Harry squarely in the chest and sent him flying off his feet. “Excellent, boy!” Lucius exclaimed. In seconds, Harry’s legs were bound and his wand was in Malfoy’s hand. “The famous Harry Potter,” Malfoy sneered. “Time to meet your maker.”

“Hello?” a voice called from down the tunnel; it was Hermione. Harry made to speak, but Lucius silenced him before he had the chance. Harry tried to break free by working magic without a wand, but with his hands bound he was unable.

“Firenze? Harry?” the voice called out again, echoing down the tunnel. Hermione appeared around the corner carrying a torch in one hand. She was completely unprepared when she saw the Death Eater. Lucius began his incantation.

“Avada Ked—” but the blast of white light from the smaller wizard came first. As with Harry, it hit Hermione squarely in the chest, and dropped her instantly. It was he who bound and gagged her, but not until she let out one cry for help that reverberated down the chamber. Another spell and she was out cold, but alive.

“She’s seen me!” Lucius spat, coming up to her with his wand. The younger wizard grabbed his arm and pulled him close whispering something in his ear. Lucius nodded. “True,” he said, and then he began to chuckle to himself. “Very true.” There was a rumble in the tunnel, and then another and another. It was as if someone was pounding on a great drum, and the great percussion grew louder and quicker with every beat.

“Come on,” Lucius hissed. “Grab the cloak and let’s go.” He cast a locomotor spell on Harry raising him some three feet off the ground. The pounding continued growing louder, dust and rocks falling from the ceiling. The younger wizard retreated a few yards down the tunnel toward the antechamber when the noise stopped. Locomoting Harry, Lucius had taken only a few steps after him when a loud, almost childlike voice stopped him cold.

“Hermy?” Harry couldn’t move to see. He didn’t need to. “Hermy!” This time the voice had a tinge of anger in it. The ground shuddered again. “You hurt Hermy!”

Lucius broke the spell on Harry which sent him falling helplessly to the ground. Still holding Harry’s wand in his left hand, Lucius cast a stunner with his right. It bounced off Grawp like a dried out spitball.

Using both wands, Lucius cast stunner after stunner, but the giant only grimaced in pain. Finally, he thought to use the killing curse, but it was too late. Grawp reached out and grabbed Lucius by the left arm near the shoulder and held him up, dangling like a rag doll. The younger wizard in the red hood began casting spell after spell, but none had an effect on the giant. Grawp stared intently at the wands in Lucius' hands and seemed to realize that these were the cause of the stinging red light. He grabbed Lucius' right arm and, still holding his left, slowly began to pull.

"Stop it!" the younger wizard pleaded. "Stop it!" Again, he blasted and blasted, but then, exhausted, fell to his knees. By now, Lucius was screaming. It was a sight Harry wanted to turn away from, but his eyes denied it. There was a sickeningly loud pop, and then a ripping sound as Grawp pulled Malfoy's left arm from out of its socket, and threw it to the floor. Blood began to stream down Malfoy's side and onto the stone floor. Seemingly satisfied with his work, Grawp dropped his unconscious adversary and turned back to check on Hermione.

The apprentice was at Malfoy's side, bathing the wound in blue light, but the flow of blood continued unabated. His hands began to shake. Harry, watching the hazy macabre scene, felt his voice return.

"Let me loose so I can help." The younger wizard rose to his feet, and quickly stepped toward Harry pointing his wand, hands shaking, directly at Harry's head.

"You idiot!" he spat through his blood-red hood.

"I can help," Harry said coolly. "Hurry!"

The cloaked wizard raised his wand high to cast a spell in fury, then dropped his wand at his side. He flicked his wrist and freed Harry from his bonds. Harry ran to Lucius and held his hands over his shoulder, blood seeping through his fingers. He closed his eyes and focused past the wound and into the Death Eater's source of energy. In Harry's mind he could see the light was still strong but seeping away. Reaching with his hands, Harry took hold of the light. Energy

flowed from Harry's body, and a flash of green filled the tunnel. He felt himself return and found the blood drying around his fingers, the wound healing, and Lucius sleeping. A great sigh fluttered the red hood of the young apprentice at Harry's side. Weak, Harry slumped to the floor on one elbow. He breathed in hard trying not to pass out.

The sound of footsteps reverberated about the chamber. Others were coming from all directions. In defeat, the young wizard reached up and pulled the hood from off his head. It was Draco Malfoy. His face was alabaster and the scar on his cheek shone red in the torchlight. His hair, drenched with perspiration, hung limp about his shoulders. His conquered gray eyes looked down the tunnel toward the footsteps of his impending doom.

"Why did you come?" Draco asked, overcome with exhaustion and almost in tears. "Why?"

The room seemed to darken as Harry collapsed to his side. He looked up at Draco who knelt down at his father's side. He had been right, Harry was an idiot. Draco had risked everything, and now he'd be hauled off to Azkaban with his father. The footsteps grew closer. But now it was Harry's turn.

"Run," he breathed. Draco sat frozen. "I said run."

"I can't," said Draco, shaking his head. "I —"

"Damn it! Run before it's too late!" Draco looked down at Harry, and for a moment the two boys held each other's gaze. Then, Draco nodded and a small grin cracked his lips.

"Oil and water, eh?" said the blonde. He pulled back his cloak, reached into an inner pocket, and unfurled a large, shimmering cloth. In an instant, he had vanished. Harry rested his head against the stone floor as the footsteps arrived, and all went dark.

A moment later, he woke to a shriek from Hermione. She was standing next to Professor Flitwick, staring in horror at the severed arm lying in a pool of blood on the tunnel floor. Grawp was nowhere to be seen.

“Harry!” Hagrid cried out, scooping Harry up in his arms. “Are yeh alright?”

Drained, Harry looked down at the tunnel floor. Not only was Draco gone, but so too was his father, Lucius. With Harry’s help, the man willing to kill his best friend had once again escaped.

“Who did this? Where did they go?” Hagrid asked.

So many questions, Harry thought. So many questions, and none with any meaning. The real question was burning its way into Harry’s mind. A question he couldn’t ask out loud, and was too afraid to answer even to his own conscience. What had he just done? An instant later, all was black.

Chapter 49 - Voices from the Past

Harry bent low upon his knees gazing intently at the water flowing quickly through the rift in the rough hewn stones. The sun was warm upon his bare back and the green grass soft beneath his bare feet. The stones were rumbling again, speaking a low deep voice that only Harry understood. "Love harbors no enemies," they reverberated in Harry's mind. He was surrounded by dense trees, but in this place there were no singing birds. Sound seemed not to exist save for the gurgling babble of the brook before him. "The sword defends, it does not attack." It... he... they were calling. Somehow, Harry knew in his heart what he must do. "Embrace the world, and you will be welcomed." He bent low to the water, balancing precipitously on the bank's edge. "Champion these precepts, enter, and be cleansed."

Freely, Harry fell forward into the rushing water and plunged into darkness. A scorching pain erupted in his forehead, as if a hot poker was driving its way not into but out of his brain. He screamed in agony.

— "Potter!"—

"Harry!"

"Stand back you two."

"It's his scar! It must be —"

"Shhhh."

"Sit up now, Mr. Potter," said Madam Guérir kindly as Harry blinked against the lights shining in his face, his head pounding. Placing an extra pillow behind him, she handed him a cup. "Here, drink this." He took a sip of the green liquid. It looked revolting, but instantly he began to feel better. The fog in his eyes started to clear and the pounding of his forehead subsided. Voldemort was angry, he thought to himself, but it wasn't all about Voldemort; there was something more, something important.

"Thank you," he said weakly. He took in a deep breath, and reached for his glasses at the tableside. He found them, crumpled and bent.

"Here," said Hermione, brandishing her wand. "Oculus Reparo."

"Thanks," said Harry, slipping the glasses over his ears, everything coming into focus. He was in a bed at the cavern entrance to the hospital ward. Ron was seated against the wall next to a table. His red hair ruffled, he looked as if he'd been sleeping. The dozens of beds that earlier laid empty were now more than half full. Madame Guérir was not the only healer present. Madame Pomfrey had arrived, as well as a few others. There were also a number of wizards and witches wearing cobalt blue robes. Harry gawked in curiosity.

"Aurors from the Ministry, Harry," Hermione whispered under her breath. "We have quite a few Death Eaters that need patching up before they're jailed to await trial."

"More than they'd show any of us," Ron spat. "They should let 'em all rot!" His words turned a few heads, but most were too busy or too of like mind to do anything about it.

Still feeling weak, Harry sat more upright for a better look, and quickly realized he was naked. Pulling his sheet more tightly around his waist, he looked at Ron. "Where are my clothes?"

"The tunnel leading to the castle has been cleared, but we're waiting for the all-safe signal to go back in. As soon as it sounds, I'll get your clothes," he said blearily. "What you were wearing was bloody awful; Dementor blood just doesn't smell right, Harry. I figure it'll take about a year to clean them proper."

"This is stupid," Harry complained, a bit dizzy. "I wasn't hurt. I need to get out of here! You can surely find me a robe or something." Aching in his joints, he swung his legs to move out of the bed with the sheet around him. "You're treating me like —"

"Harry, stop!" said Hermione stiffly. Her voice was loud and sharp, and froze him in place. She walked over and stood in front of him as he sat on the edge of his bed. One of the Aurors further down the

ward noticed the commotion and began to walk their way. “We have two problems, Harry. Neither one you’ll like. But don’t snap at me like it’s my fault, okay?” She glanced back over her shoulder.

“I would never snap at you, Hermione,” said Harry, trying to smile but finding the motion painful. Hermione just glowered and shook her head.

“First, you can’t leave because you’re wanted for questioning.”

“What?” Harry snapped. “You can’t —” Hermione pointed a finger and he settled back down.

“You were the last to see Lucius Malfoy and the other Death Eater. They think you know the —”

“The ‘I’ll stab you in the back’ MALcontent Slytherin, you mean,” interjected Ron. Hermione swung on him.

“We don’t know that, Ron. All I know is that the voice casting the spell seemed like his.” She turned back to Harry. “They want to know what you know, Harry. That’s all.” Harry swallowed hard, as the Auror in blue came closer. Hermione took a deep breath, trying to muster some extra courage for the next part.

“Secondly...” she began trying to muster the courage, but faltered. Finally, she huffed and waved her wand in the air in circles in front of Harry. The air began to glisten until it turned into a silvery mirror. Harry looked up to see his reflection, and recoiled at the sight. Slowly, he looked again, holding his hands to his face, trying to convince himself it was true.

His hair, hanging down straight about his shoulders, had turned white. His face was ashen, emaciated, and looked like a dried fruit revealing the bone structure of his skull beneath. It was as if he’d been sucked dry by a vampire. In fact, Harry looked to his neck to see if he’d been bitten.

“No, Harry,” Hermione said softly. “It’s not that. They’re not sure what it is. Although Madame Pomfrey says —”

"Is there a problem here?" The Auror had arrived behind Hermione, and she quickly vanished the mirror. He was tall, with dark brown eyes, and golden hair. A thin scar ran across his face from the bridge of his nose, below his eye, and then dropped down and vanished at his neckline. Harry wondered if that was how Mad-Eye started as an Auror. "Mr. Potter, how are you feeling?"

"I... I... er... Ohhhh," Harry groaned falling back into bed.

"Quick!" Hermione excitedly told the Auror. "Get Madame Guérir!" He turned and walked briskly to retrieve the healer. Harry opened one eye and peaked. "He's gone," she whispered. "You can't avoid them forever, Harry." She pulled the sheet up to his neck. "Still, I have to agree; it's better now that you get your rest."

Before long, Madame Guérir had Harry on his stomach and was bathing his back with a greenish light from her wand, much like she had with Ron. It seemed somehow refreshing, like drinking a tall glass of iced lemonade on a hot day. A bell chimed three times, and subdued cheers sprang up from around the ward.

"That's it, mate," said Ron, wearily taking to his feet. "All clear. I'll go get your clothes." Harry's mind had been so steeped in thought he'd forgot to ask.

"Ron, how's Fred?"

"Fred? After the battle, he didn't return to the catacombs. He left with George, and... and went to Grimmauld place." His voice started to break. "He's... they're going to tell Mum." Hermione stepped over next to Ron and put her arm around his waist, gently resting her head on his shoulder. He turned and kissed her forehead.

"Your dad? What about your dad?" Harry asked cautiously. Ron held up a hand and pointed toward the back of the ward. Harry leaned up on his elbows just long enough to get a glimpse of Mr. Weasley's red hair before Madame Guérir pushed him back down. Mr. Weasley was seated in a chair with an Auror standing at either side. "What is it Ron? What's wrong?"

"It's Fudge," said Ron in a sorrowful tone. "He flew in front of a shot meant for Dad. They don't think..." He sighed heavily and swallowed hard as Madame Guérir pulled the covers back over Harry's back.

"That'll do for now, Mr. Potter. Keep drinking this potion. I want it all gone before I come back and I won't be long." She slipped her wand away, wiped her brow, and started toward the back of the ward. As she passed Madame Pomfrey she whispered something in her ear. Madame Pomfrey shook her head, and for an instant they both looked back at Harry, but then quickly continued with their work.

"Go on, Ron," Hermione said softly. "Get his clothes. I'll tell him." He nodded, and she kissed him on the cheek before he left the room. When she turned she found Harry working at a smile. "What?" she asked. She could see the good humor in his eyes, even as she forced herself to look at the skeletal masque before her.

"Why didn't you two tell me?" he asked. "All year I've been thinking you've been doing secret missions together for the Order, and you've just been off snogging? How rich!"

"We haven't been off snogging!" she said, affronted.

"You know Ron can't keep a secret, any more than Neville can remember a password. Now that I know the couple of you are a... er, a couple, I'll break him, you'll see." Struggling for a little more air, Harry breathed in deeply. The very act of smiling seemed to exhaust him, and he leaned back into his pillow. He was suddenly feeling tired. "He told me about Germany, at least that you were mugged."

"Yes," she said, her voice troubled. "He shouldn't have taken it out on Dean like that. Sometimes I wonder who's more the hothead -- you, or him. Dean was supposed to stop by Grimmauld Place for New Years, and I hoped they'd continue mending their relationship. Now, with all this, I don't know," she sighed. For the first time, Harry saw fatigue creep into Hermione's eyes.

"What about Fudge?" he asked. Hermione pulled her chair over to Harry's bedside and sat.

“He’s dying, Harry. They don’t think he’ll make it to dawn, and that’s only an hour away.”

“Dying?” Harry asked in disbelief. “Who else? What about Colin? Remus?” Hermione reached over and took Harry’s hand.

“Two house elves died in front of the castle. Samantha Blancheater, a werewolf, was killed near Hagrid’s hut. No one knows about Remus, and the others. They disappeared into the forest, and haven’t been seen. Colin was a bit scorched. He’s behind that screen over there; he’ll be fine.” Tired, she rubbed her eyes. “There were some deaths at the Ministry, mostly goblins missing wizards and hitting their own. Feniscule Benzdrac of the Britain Goblin Alliance says that they didn’t have anything to do with the attack. He called them a bunch of crazed goblins under You-Know-Who’s control. I think the attack there was just a distraction for the main assault here.”

“Everyone here, including the Death Eaters, are going to recover. Everyone’s going to be fine, but Minister Fudge, and... and you.” She gently squeezed Harry’s bony hand in her own. “Harry, I won’t lie to you. You’ve been in here for three hours, and you’re getting worse, not better. They don’t know what to do. Madame Pomfrey has spoken twice to a specialist in London, and... and nothing.” She wiped her eyes trying hard not to cry. “What happened down there, Harry? It’s like your life is draining away. Who did this to you?”

Harry held his hand to his face. It had become thinner since last he looked. The skin was translucent, and he could see the veins running down his fingers. “This?” he asked, recalling the flow of energy from himself to Lucius. “This... I did to myself.” His mind turned to Minister Fudge. “If there’s anything left, I... I won’t let him die because of me.” Harry forced himself up in bed, and looked for his wand. It was on a table against the wall where Ron had been sitting. Next to it was his bag with the items he’d rescued from his room. “They didn’t even know the stone was there,” he whispered to himself. “Ron was right: another trap and I walked right into it.” He held up his right arm. “Accio Wand!” he summoned, but nothing happened. “Accio Wand!” he called again, still the wand remained on the table. Breathing heavily he turned to Hermione. “Hand me the damn thing.”

“Harry, you —” His glare stopped her short. She walked over and handed Harry his wand. He pointed it at his bag.

“Accio pack!” An extremely faint light blinked from his wand and then faded away. It was all he could do, but Harry sat up on the edge of the bed. “I’ll get the bloody thing myself,” he wheezed.

“At least take another drink.” She held up the potion in her hand. He took the cup and drank it down in one gulp, anxious to be on with his work. What he hadn’t noticed was the sleeping draught Hermione had slipped in with the potion. Immediately, his eyes began to droop.

“You don’t understand,” he muttered as sleep began to overtake him. “I need to...” He fell to his pillow, his hand falling in front of his face. If anything, it looked more like bone than flesh. The last thing he remembered was Hermione covering him back with the sheet.

“We can’t afford to lose both of you, Harry,” she said with a sigh, leaning down and kissing his head.

“He’s gone,” a voice called from the other side of the cavern, before all was darkness.

The water gurgled in his ears. “Purge yourself of anger. Relinquish your pride to the depths.” He felt as if someone was reaching into his skull and ripping something out through his scar. Bubbles swirled around; he realized he could breathe, but he also knew he was being pulled down deeper into the water. Harry’s head was on fire. He tried to scream, to swim away, but couldn’t. “Here Hogwarts was born, and here, at the birth of light, it will be reborn again and the darkness will at last be vanquished.”

In a swirl of colour, the vision was interrupted. Harry found himself very much awake in the ward at the hospital, or was he? There was no sound. No one moved. Not even Hermione, seated at Harry’s bedside rustled; her finger frozen in the process of turning a page in her book. It was a snapshot in time. Suddenly, there was a burst of fire filling Harry’s chest, filling all of Harry. But who? How? The colours spun again, the air filled with a great whooshing sound, and

then the bustle of the ward filled Harry's ears. His lids grew heavy and he was asleep.

Little time passed before he woke to wailing in the ward. A number of witches and wizards had gathered at the far end. Everyone was sobbing and hugging. Harry didn't need to ask, he knew, Minister Fudge had died. Two beds down, a wizard Harry didn't recognize began to chortle.

"That's just a taste of what the Dark Lord has planned for you all!" he cried out with a French accent. "Especially YOU, Potter!" An Auror struck him with a spell and his voice was silenced. He looked prepared to do more, when Madame Pomfrey pushed him aside and started tending to the patient.

The crowd began to filter out past Harry's bed. Professor Dumbledore was holding the hand of a short elderly witch with graying hair. She wore black and her eyes were red.

"He gave his life to save another, Melanie," comforted Professor Dumbledore. "There can be no greater sacrifice." He walked her to the entrance of the hospital ward and stopped. "Minerva, would you take Melanie up to my office. We can start the arrangements there." Outside the door, stood Professor McGonagall in fine purple robes.

"Certainly, Professor." She took Mrs. Fudge gently by the arm. "Come with me Mel; there's nothing we can do here." Mrs. Fudge blew her nose with a handkerchief and turned back for only a moment to catch Harry's eyes. He'd never seen so much sadness, so much loss, but he had felt it. Crying, she walked out of the ward and the door closed behind her leaving Professor Dumbledore at the foot of Harry's bed.

"Not a very Merry Christmas, I'm afraid," Professor Dumbledore said bleakly. "Fortunately, you're looking much better." Harry held up his hand, it was nearly normal. He sat up looking at his chest, thin but not emaciated.

"Professor, did you...?"

“Harry, the important thing is that you’re better. It was a brave thing you did at the portrait to Gryffindor. Professor McGonagall tells me you saved her.”

“But it’s all my fault, Professor,” Harry started, shaking his head in disagreement. “If I hadn’t —” Professor Dumbledore held up his hand,

“Let me finish, please, Mr. Potter.” He waved his wand and slid the chair Ron had sat in next to Harry’s bed. “They came to find you at Hogwarts, but you were gone. We have been preparing for such an attack for some time, particularly while I was ill. That is why Hagrid and Firenze built these caverns. The cave-in was unfortunate, and left Professor McGonagall behind. As she puts it, she would have lost her soul if it were not for you.” Professor Dumbledore leaned back in the small chair. “But, knowing your desire to battle, why would you come here when the attacks were just outside your own back door at the Ministry in London?” Harry remained silent, but a knowing glint of blue flashed through the spectacles of the Headmaster.

“Harry, when I left for the hospital to meet Professor Tonks, I warned all present to be ready for a hasty retreat to the caverns. I thought they would be safe here. I’m curious how a Death Eater found his way in, when only students with the proper password are allowed to enter the passage from the forest. As I understand it, there were young witches and wizards among the group of Death Eaters.”

Harry looked down at his hand, and remembered the gash on his finger as he had squeezed through the stone entrance. Had Draco slashed his finger trying to alert him that he was being followed? Had he ignored that warning too?

“Hermione told us she saw Lucius Malfoy in the passage leading to Hogwarts. Indeed, I removed your wand from the hand of the arm he left behind before Professor Tonks took it away. There was another with him, Harry, a young wizard. Do you know who it was?” Dumbledore’s blue eyes gleamed with kindness, but were unblinking.

Harry looked away. Draco’s words came back to haunt him, “I need your word... your word you’re in it all the way.”

"No, sir," Harry lied, knowing that his own eyes told the truth.

"I see," Dumbledore nodded. He stood, straightening his robes, and moved the chair to the side of the wall with his wand. "I will inform the Aurors that you are free to go. I suggest you return home this afternoon to Little Whinging. Someone there needs you very deeply, and may require your special talents. I believe Mr. Weasley —" Just then Ron opened the door to the ward carrying a handful of clothes.

"Hey, mate, Professor," he said lightly, then stopping to take a second look. He seemed stunned by Harry's sudden improvement. "Harry, here are your cl—" He gaped in amazement. "Your hair... it's not white." Dumbledore smiled and walked to the door. Ron instantly started in on Harry asking how he had improved so quickly. The two were well into their conversation when the Headmaster interrupted with a question.

"Harry, are you sure you healed Lucius completely?" Without thinking, Harry looked up from Ron.

"Yes, sir. I'm..." he swallowed, "...sure." Harry bit his tongue. Dumbledore knowingly nodded and left the room.

"You what?" cried Ron. "Why would you possibly do anything to save the likes of that rat? So he and his boy prince can leave you for dead?"

"You don't know that, Ron," Harry shot back, trying to stay calm. "You heard Hermione, it could have been anybody."

"Was it?" asked Ron sharply. Harry paused, and in that instant he felt Ron try to enter his mind. They'd practiced so often before that Harry had come to know the sensation.

"Reducto!" Harry cried out, sending his clothes and Ron sailing into the wall. The Aurors immediately converged. Harry stood naked, reaching down and grabbing his garments as everyone watched. Ron lay splayed out on the floor beneath him. "Don't you ever, EVER, try that again!"

“Or what?” Ron sneered. “You’ll whistle?”

A torrent of anger began to swell up in Harry, when a voice whispered in the back of his mind, “Purge yourself.” Harry closed his eyes, and breathed deep. He stepped back from Ron, and set his clothes on the bed. He pulled on his trousers and his shirt, and began to lace up his trainers while Ron simply sat on the floor glaring up at him. Seemingly satisfied, the Aurors went back to watch their prisoners. Silent, Harry briskly slipped his wand in his pocket, walked over by Ron and grabbed his pack swinging it over his shoulder. He was about to leave when Ron spoke.

“Sorry,” the redhead muttered. Harry stopped, paused for a moment and held out his hand.

“I know,” he said, pulling Ron to his feet. Together, the two made their way back to the castle. For a long while they said nothing and then they came to the spot where Grawp had torn off Lucius’ arm. Harry stopped, playing the scene out in his mind.

“It was here,” Harry whispered. “He bound her in ropes, and then Grawp came around the corner.”

“I don’t care who it was, Harry,” Ron said seething. “If I find out who struck down Hermione like that, I’ll have Grawp skin them alive.” Harry replayed the blast of white light in his mind.

“Ron, Lucius was going to kill her. Whoever knocked Hermione off her feet... he saved her life.” Ron looked into Harry’s eyes in disbelief. But Harry’s eyes stayed true. “He saved her, Ron.”

“You know who it was, don’t you? Was it Greg? I’ll bet it was Greg.” Harry took Ron by the arm.

“I need some time to sort things out. I swear, I’ll tell you all I know, when I can. Okay?” Harry asked solemnly, and Ron nodded in agreement.

When they finally emerged from the caverns, Harry thought they’d exited into the Forbidden Forest. They were surrounded by shrubs

and trees, and a soft layer of snow covered the ground. It wasn't until he followed Ron a few more feet that he realized they were in Firenze's Divination classroom. The room looked empty, but then they heard the Centaur's voice.

"Hello Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter." He bowed his head. "It is good to see you both alive. But then... it was foretold. Last night belonged to the moon, not the warrior."

"Good to see you too, Firenze," Harry bowed his head. "The catacombs, they're brilliant." Firenze shook his head with disappointment.

"Professor McGonagall was left behind because of me. I should have planned for greater spells cast at the entrance."

"Easy enough to take care of isn't it?" said Harry with a smile. "And besides, she's fine. I just saw her downstairs."

"Yes," said Firenze in a very serious tone. "And for that, I am in your debt."

"Nonsense," said Ron emphatically. "You and Hagrid saved the entire school. At least those that were here. If there's anybody that needs thanking, it's the two of you."

"You are very kind, Ronald Weasley. I see why Hagrid speaks so highly of you." Ron seemed to take Firenze's words as quite the compliment. "Still, Harry Potter, know I am pledged to your service by oath. Your star is rising in the heavens. Take heart; I have consulted Orion, and you should survive the Cleansing." Harry bowed before he and Ron left the classroom.

"Merry Christmas, Firenze," they said together as the door shut behind them. In the corridor, Harry turned to Ron.

"Are they cleaning the school or something?" Harry asked. "Do you have any idea what that meant?"

“No, do you?” asked Ron back, but Harry shook his head. “Bloody divination.”

“Harry! Why are you out of —” Hermione stopped her own sentence, stunned at Harry’s recovery. “I... I was just coming down to see you. They said that Fudge had died and I thought...” She leapt at Harry and wrapped her arms around his neck. Pulling back she wiped her face with her sleeve. “So help me if you try to die on us again, I’ll kill you.”

Together, they walked toward Gryffindor tower. As the three passed the entrance hall they saw Professor McGonagall saying goodbye to Mrs. Fudge. Their Head of House shut the doors and turned to find them looking at her.

“Well, this is fortunate,” she called out, seemingly unchanged by the night’s events. “It’s Christmas Day, and neither one of you are where you need to be. Follow me.” Her hair pulled back tightly in a bun, she walked briskly toward her office as if nothing was the least bit out of the ordinary. They passed through her office doors, and she opened a cabinet behind her desk with a flick of her wand. Reaching to the top shelf she pulled out three small boxes. “Professor Dumbledore has arranged for each of you to return home by Portkey.”

“But —”

“Yes, I’m sure you three have much scheming to attend to, but today is a time to be with family. Miss Granger, your parents have been told you were NOT spending the night at your grandmother’s house. They know you are well, but I suggest you try a dose of truth.” Ron and Harry looked shocked as Professor McGonagall held up one of the boxes to Hermione. “They’re waiting for you now.” Hermione sheepishly looked at Ron and Harry.

“Merry Christmas,” she said with a smile. She kissed Ron lightly on the lips, and then took hold of the silver sphere within the box and disappeared.

“Mr. Weasley, I believe you know what conversation is being held with your mother at this time.” She held up a box for him. “Your father

will arrive by floo shortly. Please let your brother know that my thoughts are with him."

"Thank you, Professor," Ron replied. "Merry Christmas. Harry, stop by if you can. It'll mean a lot for Mum."

"I will," said Harry quietly. Ron took the orb and vanished. Professor McGonagall reached up and adjusted her glasses. She set the last box down on her desk and turned to Harry.

"The rumor rounding the school is that I saved your life, single handedly destroying one hundred Dementors, and then I took a nap to rest by the fire." Harry began to grin. "Professor Flitwick is still fit to be tied. Every time he sees me, he curses himself for worrying so much."

"Well," said Harry, "it was nearly a hundred." But then the smile washed away as the memory flashed across his eyes. "I... I just took care of the last few." A cool shiver spread out across his back, and he began to tremble. He turned, ashamed, trying to focus his attention on one of the books in her office. Professor McGonagall pulled him around and hugged him in her arms.

"I think you were meant to return to the castle while the Headmaster was away, Harry," she whispered. "Somehow he always knows." She pulled back and wiped the tears from her face with her hands. "I wish you were returning to more happiness, Harry, but I'm afraid that's not the case." She reached in her pocket and pulled out a golden chain. "This has been in my family for many years." She held it up to reveal a gold charm in the shape of a lion and baring two ruby red eyes. "The house signet was based on this design," she reflected as she placed it around Harry's neck. "When times seem bleak, let it bring you strength, let it bring you courage." Harry was dumbstruck, unsure what to say.

"Th-Thank you, Professor," he stuttered.

"Thank you, Harry," she replied. Her eyes were sad as she held up the box. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Potter."

“Merry Christmas,” he answered, not sure what to think of her expression. He took the silver ball in his hand and felt his navel being snatched from within. He was swirling wildly, and just when he was thankful he hadn’t had breakfast, he stopped, landing feet first in the middle of the Dursley living room.

He dropped his pack and, seeing Uncle Vernon’s chair, flopped down and let out a long, long exhale. It felt as if, for the moment at least, the world had been lifted from his shoulders. He thought about going to see Gabriella, but the comfort of the chair convinced him to close his eyes and rest for just a moment. He was about ready to nod off, when a car door slammed shut from outside. Curious, he stood to see what it was.

He peaked through the front blinds, and found Privet Drive lined with cars. On the grass, stepping to the front door of Gabriella’s house was Wes Tucker. He had his arm around a girl in a long black coat. She was crying. Someone Harry vaguely remembered answered the door and let the two inside. Within a minute, Harry was across the street knocking himself. The same person answered. He was short with black hair, and very blue eyes. Harry remembered him from Duncan’s birthday party... Todd something.

“Gabriella?” Harry asked. “Where’s Gabriella?”

“You’re, Harry, right?” Todd asked.

“Yeah,” Harry stepped inside. The house was crowded and many were crying. “Where’s...” He saw her sitting next to her mother and holding Duncan’s hand. She looked up and saw him and instantly sprang to her feet, rushing toward him and squeezing him tight.

“Thank, God. Thank, God.” She was shaking in his arms. “We’ve been up all night, and then Cho sent an owl this morning that said Hogwarts had been attacked, and that people had died, and that you were there, and I thought...” She squeezed tighter.

“I’m fine,” Harry whispered. “Everything’s going to be fine.” She sniffed and, still shaking, buried her head tight against Harry’s chest.

“Oh, Harry. I would have died if I had lost you too.” Harry looked around and suddenly realized that Grigor was nowhere to be seen. Thinking her father might have died and how exactly that might have happened, the blood began to drain from his face. He held her close.

“Why, Gabriella? What’s happened?” His heartbeat quickened. She began to break down and cry in heaving sobs. “What’s happened?” As Gabriella continued to cry, Todd walked up behind Harry and put his hand on his shoulder.

“It’s Emma, Harry. We found out a few hours ago. She was killed in Paris.”

Chapter 50 - Time to Grieve

Todd was the last one to leave. For the past ten years he'd been classmates with Duncan. Two summers ago, the two had a falling out, and only really started talking again after Duncan's birthday party. Tonight, however, Todd had been as true a friend as there could ever be. He'd just finished hugging Gabriella and now had his arms around Harry. "Goodnight. I'll come by tomorrow after work." Then he whispered in Harry's ear, "Don't let him alone tonight, Harry, not in that house."

"You bet," Harry whispered back.

"Thanks, Todd," Gabriella said kissing his cheek one last time. "You've been great." Harry had to push back a sudden pang of jealousy when Todd turned to Duncan and held him in his arms.

"I'll see you tomorrow, mate. When Emma's folks get back we'll see them together, okay?" Duncan nodded without saying a word. "You know I love you, don't you? We all love you. If you need anything... anything at all..."

"I know," said Duncan hoarsely. Todd squeezed his shoulders and left, Gabriella closing the door behind him.

"He's a great friend, Duncan," she said with a warm smile and turning back into the room. "Nearly everyone who knew you or Emma was here tonight. I'm amazed at how he got the word out so quickly."

"That's Todd," Duncan nodded, "Mr. Amazing." His words landed somewhere between admiration and resentment. He let out yet another long sigh and looked at the chair in the living-room. He thought about sitting back down, but instead turned and reached for his jacket. "Look, I better go too."

It was well past midnight; Grigor who had been in his study going over photographs of the night before when Harry arrived, and Soseh whose emotions swung between tears and concern, had already gone to bed for the evening. Duncan looked exhausted. All day he had shared stories with friends about Emma. All day people had been

sobbing on his shoulder. And yet he weathered each hour without shedding a tear. Gabriella was worried, and so was Harry. Duncan's heart had hardened and nothing they could do would soften it.

"Why don't you stay here tonight," Gabriella offered. "You heard what Mama said. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"No, I need to..."

"I don't like the idea of you going home to that big house of yours all alone."

"I'll be fine, really." He grabbed his jacket and folded it over his arm, pausing to look at the large Christmas tree filled with lights in the Darbinyan living room. The packages around the bottom had gone unopened. He gazed at the tree and scanned the room for a long time as if imagining what Christmas day should have been like. Then he reached up and slipped the earring of thorns out of his ear, holding it out to Gabriella. "Here," he whispered. "Somethin' to remember her by."

"Oh, no, Duncan," she said, taking a step back. "I couldn't."

"Take it," he said firmly, thrusting it into Gabriella's hand. And then the tone of his voice softened. "I know she'd want you to have it. You... you were practically sisters." He was trying hard to maintain control.

"Thank you," she said, another tear falling down her cheek. Duncan began to open the door and a blast of frigid air swept into the room; Harry closed it.

"Harry," said Duncan, irritated, "I'm goin' home."

"I know we are," Harry said brightly. He reached over and grabbed Grigor's overcoat. "Babe, tell your dad I'll have this back first thing in the morning." He kissed Gabriella and gave her a look with open eyes. She nodded in agreement. Duncan was in no state to be left alone tonight, and giving such a personal gift was a sign of someone planning suicide. "See you in the morning?"

"I'll see you both for breakfast. Todd says Emma's mum should be home by noon, her father a bit later. Are you still okay with us going over together, Duncan? Duncan?"

"Er... right," he said, as if waking from a dream. "Tomorrow."

When the two walked outside, Harry slipped on Grigor's overcoat, but Duncan held his jacket folded over his arm. It was cold and the sky was threatening snow. Harry was surprised to find Grigor's jacket fit so well. The sleeves were a bit long, but that was the style.

"Look, Harry, you don't need to hold my hand. I'm fine. Go back to your girlfriend and let me be."

"So, I guess that means I have to sleep on the couch?"

Duncan walked over to his car. "I'm goin'... alone!" He unlocked only the driver side door and climbed inside.

"Come on, Duncan. Let me in."

Duncan turned the key in the ignition. "Alohomora," Harry whispered holding the handle of the door with his right hand. It opened and he sat in the passenger seat. "Thanks," he said. Dumbledore had told Harry someone needed his help in Little Whinging. He hoped this was it. Duncan just glared for a moment and then shoved the gears grinding it into reverse.

"You know," he spat, backing on to Privet Drive and throwing the car into drive, "I don't need you, Harry. I've been doin' just fine for the last ten years all... by... myself..." His breaths were growing quick and shallow. "I don't need my parents... I don't need friends... I don't need... I don't need..." He slammed on the brakes, stopping the car in the middle of the empty street. He gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands, and then dropped his forehead down bursting into tears. "Oh, God, Harry..." he heaved. "What am I gonna do without her?" In that moment, Duncan's heart broke open fully, and the tears streamed in torrents down his face. "What am I gonna do?"

Harry had no answers; he didn't need to. He was there, and that's what mattered most.

For over thirty minutes Duncan heaved great sobs of tears as the car idled in the middle of the street. Harry didn't say a word. Occasionally, he placed his hand on Duncan's shoulder or arm, just to let Duncan know he wasn't alone. Finally with a shudder, Duncan pulled in a chest-full of air, broadly stroking his face with his sleeve. "I can't... I can't do this. I won't do this anymore." He shoved the car back into drive, and drove to his house pulling into the driveway. Turning the ignition off, he took out the keys and handed them to Harry.

"Look, the front door's open so I don't need these. Take the car back home. I'm fine, really." Sniffing hard, he wiped another tear from his face and stepped out of the car. So too did Harry. "Damn it, Harry. Let me alone!" Duncan ran to the front door, entered and locked it before Harry could catch him. Harry walked up to the door, opened the lock, and stepped inside. Duncan was headed upstairs when Harry came in.

"How'd you get in?" he cried out. Harry simply held up the keys and jangled them in the air. He took off his overcoat and hung it on the hook by the door. The home interior was, as always, immaculate. Not in an Aunt Petunia sort of way. No, Duncan's parents never lifted a finger to clean it; they were never there. They hired a maid service to come in regularly. Harry knew Duncan had parents, but they were never seen in Little Whinging, at least not very often. Harry entered the main entryway and watched as Duncan's face grew stoic, and then his voice turned to ice. "What? You came to watch? Is that what it is?" Duncan yelled, jumping up the stairs. Harry hurried after him.

"Come on, Dunc," Harry pleaded. "I just want to talk." But, before Harry made it to the top of the stairs, Duncan had emerged with a large silver revolver in his hand. Harry stopped cold. Duncan's hand was shaking and his eyes were wide.

"You've seen these Harry, haven't you?" he said, pointing the gun's muzzle directly at Harry's face. Harry took a step backwards down the stairs, as Duncan pressed him. "Well, have you seen 'em or not?" Duncan yelled.

Harry nodded at the question, and continued to back away.

"Of course you have; very good," Duncan said in a disparaging tone. "We sell them in the shop. Tell, me, Harry, what's it called?" He held the gun in profile, and slipped it back into his fingers. "Beauty don't you think? WHAT IS IT CALLED?" he screamed, taking a step down the stairs towards Harry.

"357," Harry whispered.

"Right again, mate. But not just any 357, Harry." Duncan's eyes had grown more wild, but his hand steadied as he took another step down backing Harry onto the bottom floor. "Go on, Harry, I know you know. You were the best bloody shopkeep that store's ever seen, but you... you left me, didn't you?"

"It's a Smith and Wesson 357 Magnum," Harry answered.

"Yes, go on... give me the bloody pitch!" yelled Duncan, consumed with forcing Harry to pretend he was talking to a customer at the store.

"It has a satin stainless finish and an Ahrens wood Cocobolo grip."

"The best gun we sell, eh mate?" said Duncan admiring the revolver in his hand. The great room's recessed lights flashed off the silver metal and speckled his face with false freckles.

"Come on, Duncan. Put the gun down." But Duncan wasn't putting anything down. He'd seen his end and Emma wasn't part of it. His life was forfeit. He began to hold the gun up and pulled back the hammer. "Duncan..." Harry pleaded, holding up his hand, and then Duncan pointed it more directly at Harry.

"You know," he said clenching his jaw, "if you... if you would have stayed here with me, we would have been in South Benton. I would have had you watch the store while I went with Emma to France."

"Then you'd both be dead," swallowed Harry. Duncan's hand began to shake violently.

“Exactly!” he cried out, his heart in agony. In that instant, Duncan turned the gun away from Harry and held the muzzle to his head. Harry had no choice.

“Expelliarmus!” he called, raising his right hand. The shot rang out, just as the revolver flew from Duncan’s hand. It was as if everything was happening in slow motion. Harry heard the echo of splintering wood from the ceiling and looked up to see a small hole where the bullet had penetrated, dropping tiny shards of plaster down onto the floor. He watched the dust cascade through the air, and then saw Duncan, his eyes wide, as they rolled up into his head. A small stream of blood ran down the side of his face. He rocked backwards and then fell forwards down the stairs, landing in Harry’s arms and knocking them both to the floor, Harry’s head whipping onto the carpet.

The stars cleared from Harry’s head as he rolled Duncan on to his back and looked at the wound. The bullet had split the skin open behind his right temple, but nothing more. He lay unconscious on the floor, the blood trickling in a slow steady stream passed his ear. Harry pulled his wand and held it over the wound, but he stopped short of sealing it completely. He pulled Duncan to the couch in the living room and hoisted him onto it. He put a pillow under Duncan’s head, and went to retrieve the pistol from the steps. The smell of gunpowder hung in the air and for a moment Harry felt as if he would be sick. Quickly, he emptied the bullets into the trash, stuffed the gun in the pocket of Grigor’s overcoat, and cleaned the spot of blood on the floor, but left the ceiling like it was. He sat on the recliner next to the stereo, turned on some music, slipped off his trainers, took a deep breath, and waited.

Harry was about to fall asleep when there was scratching at the door. He pulled his wand and slowly opened it only to find an owl carrying a parchment. Harry took the note and sent the bird on its way. It was an official notice from the Ministry.

Notice to recipient,

At 0130, the 26th of December 1997, a Muggle of your acquaintance witnessed your magical spell. Because of recent events, the Ministry is unable to dispatch appropriate mind erasure members at this time.

Please note the name of the Muggle and send it to the Ministry within three days of receipt of this notice. In the meantime, take all necessary precautions in silencing the Muggle in question. Failure to do so may result in fine or imprisonment.

Cedil Perkins

Director, Muggle Relations Office

“Unbelievable,” Harry whispered to himself, rubbing his eyes, and stuffing the note into his pocket. He was about to sit back down when Duncan began to stir.

“No!” Duncan yelled out from the couch. He was still on his back, his eyes closed, and he held his hands up in front of him as if trying to stop an attacker. “No! I didn’t...” Harry walked over to him and held his hands. The touch was enough to wake him, but not completely. He sat up and started hitting Harry who fell to his knees. Suddenly, Duncan realized what he was doing.

“Harry?” he asked weakly. He grabbed Harry’s face in his hands. “Harry? Thank God! I thought I had shot you!” He began to tremble and then wrapped Harry in both his arms, and pulled him close. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He whispered over and over again. Finally, the whispers gave way to tears, and Duncan, still holding Harry, fell to the floor on his knees and wept. He began to shake as Harry held him in his arms. He would hold Duncan for however long it took. It was much easier than looking down the barrel of a 357 Magnum.

When Duncan finally let go, he grabbed a pillow, clutched it in his arms, dropped down on his side, and curled up in a ball. The sun was just beginning to break the light of day, and Harry leaned back against the foot of the couch.

“I’m so bloody pitiful,” said Duncan into the pillow.

"No you're not," encouraged Harry.

"I can't even shoot straight from one inch away."

"Thank God for that," Harry whispered.

Duncan paused. "God and I have a few things we need to discuss," he said finally in a searing tone.

"Let's just put off the face-to-face for awhile," Harry tried to say lightly. Duncan did not reply. Instead he looked up at the stairs and held his hand to his wound. Then he looked up at the hole in the ceiling.

"I don't know what I was doin', Harry. What I said... I didn't mean it. I can't believe I pointed the gun at you like that. It's like I was possessed," Duncan said, turning the night's events over in his mind. "Your scream saved my life, Harry... for what it's worth."

"For what it's worth?" Harry asked. "Do you know how many lives you've touched in Little Whinging? Those people showed up yesterday at Gabriella's to give you back just a small portion of what you've given them over the years. Your friends would walk through fire for you, Duncan." Harry started thinking about his own words. "You don't see it because you're too close. You think about Tom Spinner, and only remember how you helped hook him up with Wes to get a deal on fixing his car. Or maybe old Ms. Sword down by the park who couldn't afford to have her house painted, but you got the paint free and a bunch of guys from the neighborhood took care of her place in one weekend. And when the Boy's Club caught fire last year, who's sports shop was it that donated a dozen gaming tables for the new building? I know how hard you pushed Mr. Fettle to make that happen." Duncan sat up on the floor, looking down at his hands and shaking his head.

"Duncan, it's... it's like a patchwork quilt. Maybe you see each patch you've made, and maybe you don't. But the rest of us see the quilt that has helped keep the town of Little Whinging warm since any of us can remember." Duncan looked up at Harry, tears welling in his eyes once again. "Let us be here for you. Let us help you get through this, okay?" For a long time he looked at Harry, his eyes glistening

and then, finally, Duncan nodded with a sniff, the first hint of a smile on his face. Harry stood up, reached his hand down and pulled Duncan to his feet. "Let's get cleaned up. Soseh will be angry if we're late for breakfast."

Harry waited as Duncan showered, shaved, and dressed. He had combed his blonde hair back and was wearing a pair of dark dress slacks, with a burgundy shirt and a black tie. Harry shivered thinking about how he would have to buy some nice clothes for Emma's funeral. The mark on the side of Duncan's head had bruised a little over the night, but the cut was covered with a single bandage. No thorns hung from his ear.

"Let's do this," Duncan breathed. The two took Duncan's car back to the Darbinyan's and stepped out. It was a quiet ride, but already he could tell that Duncan was beginning to feel again. A light snow was falling that, with the warming day, would soon turn to rain. Harry decided to walk Duncan to Gabriella's door before going home to change himself. It was Soseh that answered their knock.

"Grigor?" she questioned blankly, looking at Harry. He realized he was still wearing Grigor's overcoat.

"Oh, no, Soseh," he corrected. "It's me, Harry."

"Harry?" she asked again blankly. It was clearly one of her 'bad' mornings.

He sighed, slipping his cold fingers into the pockets, and discovered with one hand that Duncan's pistol was still there, and with the other he felt the thin roundness of what was most certainly a wand. His eyes widened.

"You know Harry, Soseh," Duncan said brightly, stepping forward. "Harry Potter."

"Potter?" Soseh questioned again, her eyes flashing with sparks of recognition. "Yes... yes, I know Harry Potter. Quite famous you know." Suddenly Grigor came bursting through the door.

"There you are!" he yelled. "Give me that, boy." He nearly tore the jacket from Harry's back.

"Sir, wait!" Harry pleaded, but it was too late. Grigor was already to his car.

"I may not be back for dinner, Soseh," he called back to his wife at the door. "Don't wait up."

"But..." Harry tried again. Grigor was ignoring him. "Aye," Harry grimaced, biting his knuckle.

"What is it, Harry?" Duncan asked.

"Your, er..." he looked at Soseh and then back to Duncan, "Cocobolo grip was in Grigor's pocket." Still on the front step, they watched as the car drove off down Privet Drive, and disappeared around the corner.

"Good," Duncan whispered, taking Soseh by the arm and helping her back inside. "Watch your step, Mrs. Darbinyan. Whatever you've got cookin' certainly smells wonderful."

"Look, I'll be back after I clean up," said Harry as Duncan disappeared into the Darbinyan's. Duncan stuck his head out the door.

"Sure thing, Mr. Potter. We'll wait. You're famous you know?" Duncan snickered, closing the door. Harry hoped she'd simply forget and turned to walk back home.

He entered the Dursley's and once again found the living room was still a disaster. For a while, Harry started to pile some of the splintered wood next to the now opened fireplace, but realized it would take far too long, and his stomach was grumbling a bit with hunger. "It can wait till tonight," he shrugged to himself.

Before long, he had showered and dressed, and was lacing up his old battered trainers (his new ones having been soaked in Dementor blood) when he noticed the small red package that Tonks had given

him lying on his dresser. She had asked that Harry wait for Christmas and today was the day after. He picked up the small box and took a glance out his window at the house across the street. How had it gotten so complicated? He couldn't help but think that somehow he was responsible for Mr. Fudge's death, but what about Emma's? It was his blood that had brought Voldemort back to corporeal life. For the thinnest of moments, his mind wondered if the murders would stop if he gave himself over to the Dark Lord. But of course, they wouldn't. He sat next to the window and watched the skyline as the morning snow turned into rain.

Rolling the package in his hands a few times, he slipped off the green bow and opened it. Out fell a thin golden rod about eight inches long. Hollow on one end and about the width of a straw, its other end was capped with something akin to a skull-like gargoyle head. There were no inscriptions, no other markings. Harry held it in his hand for quite some time, staring intently at the masque that looked mockingly back at him. He didn't understand why Tonks would give him such a gift, and then noticed two folded slips of paper tucked into the box. He pulled them out and examined both carefully. They had been torn from the pages of books... old books. The first page was small, and bordered with the image of the same figure that capped the golden rod still in his hand.

The key to futures past and present

Depends on wit and wile

Blend the three and turn the key

Use wisdom for the dial

Select the mark to throw them hence

Select the mark to keep them

Select the mark to bring them whence

the darkness now doth steep them

The next page was larger, and older. Indeed, it had a stale, moldy smell to it that reminded Harry of the restricted section of the Hogwarts Library. It was stained with small, dark spots... blood, Harry thought.

Liquid of life that springs eternal

From birth of light to death infernal

Welled from source of endless magic

To bring back those whose loss was tragic

Liquid of life that courses pure

Split in spite without a cure

Yet saved from death by hated foe

Who stopped the ebb and staved the flow

Liquid of life in molten state

Cast to let its brethren mate

Spin the lock and turn the key

To let our captured allies free

Then to the side, written by hand in fresh ink were the lines

Set the mark before the brew

to slay the ignorance once thought true.

Then as the three mix into one,

and breathe the mist through which they'll come,

spirit, soul, and purity,

protect yourself from enmity.

Harry read each poem through a few times, trying to get his mind around why Tonks would send him such a thing. "I hate riddles," he whispered to himself. Part of him wanted to toss the papers aside and wait to ask her when he returned, but there was something intriguing about the words, and he continued to focus his mind.

"Lucius?" he wondered out loud. He took out his own quill, about to jot down some thoughts, when he heard a car come to a stop across the street. He looked out the window and watched as Todd, dressed in a black suit, stepped out of his bright blue sports car and up to the Darbinyan front door.

Gabriella met him, giving him a hug and kissing his cheek. Without good reason, Harry's face flushed with anger, and in an instant he was down at Gabriella's door. He opened it not bothering to knock, ready to pound Todd into a bloody pulp, to hex him into oblivion. But, when he entered, he found Gabriella helping her mother in the kitchen and Todd holding Duncan in his arms. Duncan was crying. When Todd saw Harry enter, he turned to face him, still holding an arm about Duncan as he wiped his face with a white handkerchief. Todd's face was nearly as white, and his eyes uncharacteristically frightened. He gestured to Harry to come closer.

"Jesus Christ, Harry!" he hissed under his breath. "Where's the gun?" At Todd's words, Duncan sniggered. "What? This isn't funny," said Todd reproachfully.

"I borrowed Grigor's overcoat last night," Harry swallowed. "When I came back this morning, he grabbed it off my back and left." There was a long pause, just as Gabriella looked up to see that Harry had arrived. A beaming smile broke across her face, as she and Soseh set the food on the table. "It's... it's in his pocket." Again, Duncan laughed under his breath.

"Bloody, hell," Todd hissed again rolling his eyes, then he looked at Harry's side. "What's that?" In Harry's hand was the tube with the gargoyle head on it.

“Oh this? Er, nothing.” He quickly slid the tube in his back pocket next to his wand. Todd watched the gold intently until Harry slipped it away, and then he moved to set Duncan down.

“Well... well maybe he won't look,” Todd said hopefully. But Harry knew that when Grigor reached to make sure his wand was there, he would most certainly find the heavy chunk of metal in the other pocket.

“He'll find it,” Harry muttered darkly.

“Find what?” Gabriella asked walking over to the boys now huddled so conspiratorially.

“Find this.”

They all turned to the front door to find Grigor dangling the Smith & Wesson by the trigger guard with his left index finger. Gabriella looked confused, while the boys simply stood frozen. Grigor stepped briskly up to the young man with green eyes.

“Papa?” Gabriella asked, but he ignored her.

“Harry, a word if you please.” It was not a request, and Harry followed Grigor to his study.

“Mr. Darbinyan,” Duncan called out, “it's my...”

“This is not your concern, Duncan,” Grigor said sternly as he opened the study door. Harry walked through and Grigor followed.

“But...”

Grigor shut the door firmly.

“Mr. Darbinyan...” Harry began.

“Please sit,” Grigor interrupted as he walked behind his desk. Again, Harry found himself sitting in the leather chair, looking up at the father of his true love, who looked back at him with eyes of pure hate. He

would have much rather been in this room talking to Grigor about the various instruments that were scattered about like so many toys in a child's playroom. Instead, he was looking into fire and brimstone and he could feel himself noticeably begin to perspire. "My daughter is very precious to me," Grigor began.

"She's precious to me, too." The words fell uncontrollably out of Harry's mouth. Grigor's face reddened as he cocked his neck, and then his fingertips began to explore the wood grain of his desk.

"I told you... to stay away from my daughter!" he breathed quietly. His face seemed almost calm, but his eyes were on fire. "And now, you bring a gun into my house? I will not have her life placed at risk at the whim of some... some..." Harry knew he wanted to say Muggle -- an incurable criminal. Inside, now more than ever, Harry wanted to scream out that he wasn't, but he had given his word to Gabriella. Instead, he tried another truth. A truth he needed to discuss with an adult.

"Duncan tried to kill himself last night," he said simply. Grigor's glaring eyes blinked. "I took the gun away from him. I was going to take it to my house and put it away before I entered your home, sir, but you took the coat before I could." Grigor's right index finger began to quickly tap the top of his desk. He was rolling over Harry's words in his mind. The fire flashing in his eyes abated. For a moment, he looked at the door and Harry could have sworn he heard it click. Then, Grigor sat down in his own chair, pulled open a desk drawer and dropped the gun inside. Before he closed it, he retrieved a pipe and tobacco and a moment later, still not having said a word, he was blowing plumes of smoke about the room, pacing to and fro. Harry remained silent while, for some time, Grigor examined one of his more antique looking telescopes. Finally, he turned to look toward Harry and blew a grand billowing gray cloud.

"Suicide?" he whispered, as if he only now comprehended. Harry nodded slowly. "Stand up boy," he commanded. The tone suddenly made Harry feel angry. It reminded him of his uncle, and he didn't like it. He stood knowing there was an expression on his face that bore the look of insolence, but there was nothing he could do. Grigor walked over and stood close, then looked him up and down. He was

only a few inches taller than Harry, but much more stout. Very stout for an astronomy professor, Harry thought. And then Grigor caught Harry's eyes and looked transfixed. Harry couldn't help but think he saw tears begin to well up just as Grigor turned away.

"I know the look of insolence too well, child. How old are you, Harry, sixteen?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied still standing as Grigor looked out the large pane window of his office. It overlooked the Darbinyan's large backyard, and even from Harry's perspective one could tell it had fallen into disrepair since his visits with Gabriella over the summer.

"I won't lose my daughter, Harry." His words were quiet, and intense. "Not to a mere boy incapable of..."

"I love her, sir. And I know she loves me," Harry interrupted. "Our paths have come together, and they won't fork." Grigor spun on Harry's words.

"Do you think love is enough?" he spat, the fire returning to his eyes. "Do you think love is enough to hold on to someone? Don't think for an instant that love will prevent Gabriella from being torn from your very grasp, and crushed to pieces like dried bread on a summer's day. Don't think that love will keep those you hold dear from harm, Harry, because it won't! Love clouds the eyes, and dulls the senses. It robs you of your ability to truly protect those most precious. And when it's too late, when all has been lost, it flees from your heart leaving nothing but despair, and then flitters about trying to tempt you to love again."

"On my daughter's birthday, my only son, a son I loved more than anything on earth, was killed by ignorance, and greed. I turned to my best friend, my colleague, for solace only to have him murdered days later. In a few short weeks everything I loved was taken from me... everything, but my wife and daughter, and I won't have them put in danger again."

Grigor returned to the window, stretched out an arm, and leaned against the frame. "Tell me young Mr. Dursley, if it were in your power,

what would you give to bring back the loved ones you've lost?" Harry said nothing. "I don't want you to love my daughter, but I will sleep knowing that you do your best to keep her safe. That's your only value to me." The words were hollow and dark and when he turned back to look at Harry his face had turned ashen, and his hands began to tremble. "This too... for now, keep her happy. She has seen so much death, it is not fair that she should suffer more, and yet it is so once again." Grigor looked back out the window. "If only she could know the truth," he said with a sigh. "Would that I could set things right," he whispered. Another moment past, and he took a deep breath and walked back over to Harry.

"Go... eat... be with your friends, and grieve. I'm afraid Mars has had the better of me today, and it is not yet noon." Grigor tried to muster a smile and reached for Harry's hand. "On my honor, I will see what I can do to help your friend Duncan." Harry reached for Grigor's hand, when Grigor slid his hand higher and pressed it firmly about Harry's forearm. Harry did likewise. Snapshots of Harry's first visit with Grigor in this study flashed in front of Harry. He was trying to remember something, as if his mind was culling through his memories, tossing pages of thoughts all about the room, when it hit him: it was the handshake... a very foreign handshake.

Chapter 51 - The Truth Revealed

With the help of Gabriella, Harry wore a two-piece black pinstripe suit and polished black shoes. Unfortunately his hair, which started out the morning better than normal, was now as disheveled as ever. The manager at Marley's Men's Shop had told him that a black handkerchief was a poor idea, but Harry thinking it appropriate for a funeral didn't listen. Now, he understood why it was a poor idea. It was strange being fitted for a Muggle suit Harry hoped he'd only wear once. It reminded him of his fitting with Madame Malkin and, when he was being pinned, his mind turned to Malfoy. There was Harry, dealing with the results of Voldemort's Death Eaters, and somewhere Draco was with his father living among them. His thoughts contorted wondering why he hadn't let Lucius die. Now, taking back his white stained handkerchief from Gabriella as they returned home from Emma's funeral, he felt he'd made the wrong decision. Lucius Malfoy alive was much worse than Lucius Malfoy dead, and Harry was beginning to strongly reconsider if Draco had betrayed him.

"Harry," Gabriella sniffed, "are you alright?" Her eyes were red and swollen from her endless tears over the last few days, and yet she was asking how he was. His heart warmed and he held her hand.

"Me?" he whispered, as he started to turn down Privet Drive, the setting sun glaring in his eyes. Grigor's car was gone, so he pulled into the driveway. He had not said anything to Gabriella about his conversation with her father. Still, it had been haunting him ever since. More than once she had asked him why he was rubbing his right forearm, and more than once he simply shrugged his shoulders pulling his left hand away. He had wanted to wait until Emma's funeral. And now it was over.

They had paid tribute to a memory, a photograph. There was no Emma to say goodbye to. Her body had been incinerated in the fire and all that remained were the collective thoughts of the many friends she left behind. It was the first time that Harry had met Emma's parents. They seemed kind enough, older than he had imagined, and a bit overwhelmed by the number in attendance. Half of Little Whinging turned out to pay tribute to Emma's memory, some just because they'd read about her death in the local paper. Her parents

shied away from all the attention, but her father delivered an eloquent eulogy, and Duncan mustered up the courage to say a few words. Although, the way Mr. Slate went on about his shy and reserved daughter, Harry wondered if they were talking about the same girl. When Duncan placed his engagement ring on the table in front of her photograph, there wasn't a dry eye in the church, except for Harry. He was numb, unable to feel much of anything.

Tonight, Todd was staying with Duncan, as he had for the last few nights. Harry was surprised when Grigor contacted one of his colleagues at the university to tell him of Duncan's suicide attempt. Dr. Phellman, a psychiatrist, came to Duncan's house and set up a series of counseling sessions with him. Todd had sworn to Gabriella that he would ensure Duncan made every appointment. After having watched Duncan nearly kill himself, Harry was sure that Duncan needed more help than any of his friends could give on their own. He was struggling to come to grips with Grigor's act of kindness, and the lurching feeling in his stomach that made Harry think his neighbor was a Death Eater.

Harry turned the ignition off and flashed Gabriella a smile. "I'm fine," he answered, impassively. He began to open the door when she grabbed his arm.

"No, you're not, Harry," she said firmly. He didn't want to look at her, he couldn't. He knew his eyes would expose his soul, and there were too many things he was holding back. "Look at me!" Against his better judgment, he turned to look into her black eyes.

"I'm... fine," he muttered weakly.

"I know you cared for Emma, Harry, and I know your heart; and yet... not a tear? Not this whole time? One of your dearest friends lost his fiancé, your girlfriend lost her closest friend, and you, the most sensitive boy I've ever met..." She stopped, tears beginning to well in her eyes, pain flashing that was deeper than Harry could fathom. He handed her his handkerchief and again she wiped her face and blew her nose, handing the worn black cloth back to Harry. "I'm sorry... I'm being stupid."

"No!" Harry instantly shot back. "Don't ever say that. Don't ever think that." He held her left hand in both of his. "In life, you were her truest friend, and now that she's gone you continue to watch after all those she's touched. I wish I had half your strength." He kissed her hand, and lost himself in the pools of black, glistening back at him. It was time she knew. "I... I killed her, Gabriella. As sure as you're sitting next to me right now, Harry Potter is responsible for Emma Slate's death."

"Now you're sounding like Duncan," she said dismissively. But Harry held her gaze with his own green eyes. Her disbelief gave way to doubt... gave way to the possibility... and the blood began to drain from her face. Harry wanted to tell her everything. He needed to tell her everything. But not here... not like this.

"Come on," he breathed, "it's time you knew." They both stepped out of the car and started for the Dursley's. Then Harry remembered the living room, and knew Gabriella would be mad about it. "Er, how about your place?" She nodded, and when they entered the Darbinyan entry, they found Soseh asleep on the couch in the living room. Gabriella quietly beckoned Harry up to her room.

It was the first time he'd ever climbed the stairs and his heart quickened a bit in anticipation. He wasn't sure what to expect, but when she opened the door, he knew it was perfect. Through the window behind an impressive telescope, Harry could see his own room across the street. He realized that the Dursley's could see this way too, and he wondered how often during the summer his uncle spied on the Darbinyan's from his own bedroom. Her bed was a large four-poster that reminded him of the beds at Hogwarts, but the colors were a soft pink and a royal purple. There was a desk with a computer, quills next to standard paper, and candles everywhere. About the walls were shelves and shelves of books, and in the corner a large kick-bag hung from the ceiling for punching and kicking. Harry walked over to it and half-heartedly gave it a punch. He hurt his hand and tried not to show it, but Gabriella noticed and snickered. She lit three candles, and they sat arm in arm on the side of her bed.

"When I start," he whispered, "please, let me finish. If you stop me, I don't know if I'll be able to start again." Gabriella nodded.

Harry took in a large breath and began. He told the story of the Boy Who Lived, at least as best as he knew it; a story she'd heard pieces of in her own country. He spoke of the challenges at Hogwarts and what had happened over the years. He spoke of his dearest friends and deadliest enemies. He explained how Cedric and Sirius had died, and how Neville and Luna had been taken. He even explained his new pact with Draco, and how he'd let him leave the caverns beneath the Forbidden Forest. He told her, not of her father, but of the mark on his arm, and of what powers it seemed to give him. His mouth was dry and hands were shaky. He watched as her face turned from concern to horror, but now it had settled on something more inscrutable. He realized his thumb had been nervously rubbing the back of her hand while he spoke, and stopped. He had told so much to so many, but not what was to follow. The prophecy stuck in his throat like a fur ball. He swallowed hard and told her why anyone who would stand with him was at risk, why her life was most certainly in danger, why either he or Voldemort must die. They sat together in silence for quite some time. He was considering what he should say about her father, when she took advantage of the pause and spoke.

"He's alive?" she asked with a wavering voice. He was surprised to find that someone so far removed from life in England would be so troubled by the Dark Lord's name.

"Yes," Harry answered. "He's alive. I've seen him." He paused. "I've been him." Gabriella narrowed her eyes.

"I don't understand."

"When he tried to kill me, he left a link." Harry pulled back the hair from about his scar. "We have access into each other's minds. Every night I fight it, and every day it grows stronger."

Instantly, she pulled her hand away as if in her eyes he was a criminal all over again. Harry slid off the bed and slumped onto the floor, looking down at his own hands. Her cat sat up, stretched and purred, circling about Harry and begging for affection. He stroked the cat's soft fur and then he spoke out loud the words that had been repeating in his mind all week.

"Voldemort had them attack Paris and the Ministry in London to pull attention away from Hogwarts. He wanted to attack Hogwarts to find me... to kill me." His voice was hollow... empty. "I've known. I've always known. If I had come when first he called, Neville and Luna would be safe, Fred would have been laughing with his family over Christmas... and Mr. Fudge, and... and Emma would still be alive." He turned and looked up at Gabriella and she saw for the first time tears pooling in Harry's eyes. "He calls me every night, but I won't listen anymore. I won't watch what he's doing to my friends, what he'd do to you if he knew. And Gabriella... he knows. He knows." His body gave a giant shudder, and he dropped his face into his hands and began to cry. But an instant later he stopped, and wiped his face.

"I didn't want this," he scowled, looking out her window at the darkening sky. "I didn't ask for this." He stood keeping his back to her. "I'm no hero." He walked toward the door and turned to look at her one final time. "I'm no monster either." He stepped into the hall only to run headlong into a very tired Soseh, nearly knocking her over. Her eyes grew wide.

"Harry Potter!" she smiled broadly. "Praise Asha for your goodness!" She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. "The weight of the world lies on the precipice of your shoulders." Soseh pulled back to look him in the eyes, her own glowing brightly. "She has spoken to me of the one with green eyes who would risk his own life to save the life of an enemy. The tools of victory have been revealed to him, if only he would see." Soseh reached up and held his face with her hands and pulled him close kissing both his eyes. She let him go, and took a step back.

Before Harry could think, Soseh arched her arm and slapped him across the face. "If I ever find you in my daughter's room again with the door closed, I will skin you like a rabbit! Do you understand young man?" she said coolly. His mind was swirling, but if there's one natural instinct every sixteen-year-old boy has, it's to say yes to your girlfriend's mother.

"Y-yes ma'am," Harry stumbled, rubbing his cheek.

“Good,” said Soseh. “Let’s eat dinner.”

Harry started to explain why he had to leave when Gabriella grabbed him from behind wrapping her arms around his waist.

“Have I told you I love him, Mama?” she asked brightly.

“Yes, darling,” said Soseh descending the stairs. “But that’s no excuse.” She held a finger in the air waving it in admonition.

“Has he told you he loves me?” At this question, Soseh stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned around. For a moment, Harry saw the same Soseh he had known from summer. A warm glow seemed to radiate from her expression.

“I have painted it so, have I not?” Soseh’s grin had a hint of mischief, and she turned back into the kitchen. Harry spun and squeezed Gabriella hard. He began to shake, and soon the tears that he had stopped earlier began to flow freely and quietly. The sound of pots and pans clanked from the kitchen below as Gabriella held Harry in her arms at the top of the stairs. Finally, Harry let go and looked at his love.

“He’ll take you from me,” he breathed.

“He’ll try,” Gabriella agreed. “And he might succeed.” She wiped his cheek with her hand. “Harry, I come from where there are never any guarantees. Bombs rained down from the heavens, and belched up from the streets. They exploded in churches, in the markets, or on the playgrounds. And the people that sent them cared less about who they killed than the bombs. I was the one who asked to leave, and it was Papa who thought it might be safer here. In many ways, we were both wrong. Sometimes you have to stand firm to make a difference... to stop the death. You know, even if you were to leave me tonight never to return, the Phantom of Death would still strike at my heels. At least I now know the risks. They’re mine to take, not yours, and I take them freely.”

“But...”

"Thank you for being brave enough to tell me the truth. Cho told me that Gryffindors were known for being brash fools, but after meeting a few of your friends, I think perhaps she left a thing or two out."

"Brash fools?" Harry flared slightly, and Gabriella smiled.

"Come here," she said leading him by the hand down the stairs. Soseh already had the home smelling warm and inviting. Harry and Gabriella went over to the tree, and they both knelt down among the still unopened gifts. "We said we'd wait and we have. It's time to move on." She reached down and picked up a fairly large present. "Here."

Opening the box he noticed that the large fir tree was standing nailed to wooden boards on the floor. It had been up for weeks without water, and yet it was as fresh and green as ever.

"Gabriella... your tree. Don't you water it?" Harry asked, slipping off the bow.

"Well, Mama takes care of the tree. Why?" she asked. Harry slipped off the wrapping paper from the box.

"No reason," he answered, glancing over at Soseh, still busy in the kitchen. He lifted the lid off the box to find a soft grained, leather coat similar to Grigor's overcoat but not quite as long. Harry stood and slipped it on. Grinning, Gabriella rubbed her hands down his shoulders. "Brilliant. Thank you," he said kissing her gently on the lips.

"It's soft," she said stroking his chest.

"I don't think I'll ever take it off," he said with a smile.

"And it has some... special features." Her eyes twinkled for the first time since they'd first heard of the bombing in Paris. She reached low around behind him with both hands.

"Nope, it's never coming off."

“Don’t be silly,” she said, grabbing his wand from his pants pocket and slipping it out. “Here.” She slid the wand in a small compartment in the left sleeve of the jacket. “Now you can tuck your shirt in.”

“Nice,” he said, turning his back to the kitchen and sliding the wand from the compartment much like a quick-draw expert pulling his six-shooter.

“And this,” added Gabriella. She grabbed a blanket hanging over the back of the couch and started to push it into the front pocket of the jacket. The blanket kept going, and going until it fully disappeared into the coat, without the least sign of a bulge.

“I can’t even tell it’s in there,” Harry whispered, realizing that not only had the blanket disappeared into his coat, it was also weightless.

“Dinner!” Soseh called.

Harry pulled the blanket out of his coat, and Gabriella kissed him. “There are some other surprises... you’ll see.”

“I thought you said...”

“Let’s eat. They’ll be time for more later.”

“How much more?” Harry whispered in Gabriella’s ear with a smile.

“Coming Mama,” Gabriella called back to the kitchen. “Should I open mine now?” she asked Harry reaching down and picking up the modest package that he had placed there earlier in the week.

“You can open it at the table. I’m sure your mom will want to see.” He paused. “I’m sure your dad will want to see too, but we can figure that out later.” They walked over and sat down with Soseh, and Gabriella began to open the gift.

“Great things come in small packages,” Soseh beamed, rubbing her hands together. “I’ve always been fond of jewelry.” She flashed a look at Harry, who looked nervously away. “But some things are more important, aren’t they my child?” He looked up and felt her look right

through him again. He hadn't noticed that Gabriella had already opened the package.

"Tickets? And more tickets? And what's this... a booklet? Harry, it looks as if..."

"Only if you want to," he interrupted. "I kinda got everything before I knew... you know. Anyway, it's this summer. I thought, maybe, we might get out of here. The Mediterranean... Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel. You've seen my roots, for what they're worth; I wanted to learn more about yours. Four weeks we cruise as part of a youth enrichment program to understand the issues facing the Middle East, and then another four weeks volunteering time in Armenia."

"Armenia?"

"I know... it's crazy. After what we talked about upstairs, I'd understand if you said no. It's not the safest part of the world anyway, but I thought maybe I could learn something."

"It's not crazy," said Gabriella warmly at Harry. "It's brilliant."

"Supervised?" Soseh asked pointedly.

"Actually, it's organized as part of a collaboration between the various religious groups out of South Benton. So, yes ma'am, very supervised."

"Let me speak with your father... after Harry leaves for school. I think it may take all spring to convince him, but we will. You'll see, we will."

"Thank you, Harry," said Gabriella, reaching over and hugging him close.

After dinner, they went for a walk along Privet Drive, Harry wearing his new coat. For being so light, it was spectacularly warm.

"You know," Harry said softly, "your dad might say no, and then you'd walk away from Christmas with nothing."

"I'd still have you," she said. The air was still as she pulled his arm close. They were returning home and Harry was steering her to the Dursley side of the street.

"Well, I thought maybe you'd like something else." He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a small box. She opened it to reveal a pair of earrings. "I've pretty much worn the one I'm wearing through and I thought something in gold might make a nice change." About an inch long, there was a winged staff made of white gold entwined with two serpents of yellow gold--the caduceus. "It was the name of my new broom, but now knowing you're a healer I like them even more." Harry expected an ooh, or an ah, but instead the response was something quite different.

"You fly?" she said excitedly, holding the gift in one hand close to her chest.

"Yeah," said Harry smiling back, "a little."

"We really must..." and she stopped herself. Her face fell slightly and she opened her hand and looked at the earrings. "They're beautiful, Harry. Thank you." They continued to walk as Gabriella split the pair, and they each put one on. "Tell me about your broom... a Caduceus? I last had my heart set on a Firebolt."

Before long they were at the Dursley front door. It was still relatively early and as they held each other's hands the twinkle flashed in Gabriella's eyes.

"Will you come in?" Harry asked absentmindedly. Gabriella nodded, glancing across the street.

"Tonight, she seems better somehow. Don't you think?" she asked.

"She knew more than just my name tonight. That's a good sign." Harry opened the door, walked into the living room and cringed. He still hadn't cleaned the front room, and when Gabriella entered she gasped.

“Harry Potter, you mean to tell me you haven’t picked up one stick this whole time! You swore to me...”

“I’ve picked up more than one!” he shot back in defense. “At least three, maybe four.” There were dozens of wood splinters scattered all over the room.

“I can’t believe you’ve just left this here all this time!”

“Well you could help, you know. I can’t use magic, but you could just...”

“You know I can’t either,” she said a bit heatedly.

“Oh, you can use it to vanish my scar, and to keep a tree alive,” accused Harry, “but you can’t help me clean up a bit.”

“I’m a healer, not a housekeeper!”

“Fine... fine,” said Harry, trying to calm things down. This was not going like Harry had imagined. “Look I’ll do it tomorrow, I swear.” He was about to suggest they sit, but the room was too much a mess. Suggesting they go upstairs seemed too forward, especially after just having had a spat. His eyes looked around the room. “What do you say we go to visit the Weasley’s? Just for a few minutes. I promised I’d visit and I’ve been ignoring them all vacation.”

“I... I really shouldn’t.”

“It’s not like real magic or anything. It’s just floo powder. Come on, just a few minutes... I swear.”

“Where have I heard that before?” said Gabriella, rolling her eyes. She crossed her arms and looked at the fireplace. “Well, you’d have to pick up at least some of this mess to get the fire started. That’s something.” She paused. “Okay. But just a few minutes!”

Harry beamed as he gathered wood for the fire. Just as it started to roar, he turned to Gabriella. “I need to show you the address. This is a safehouse for the Weasley’s and I need your word that you won’t

reveal its location to anyone, nor ever say it out loud.” He waited deliberately until after she nodded. “Not even your father.”

“I swear,” she said melodramatically. Harry held her hands and looked deeply into her eyes.

“Gabriella, I know it sounds cloak and dagger, but there are those who would torture you to death to uncover this information. And once they knew, countless lives would be lost. You mustn’t let anyone know that you know.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, standing somewhat taller. “I won’t tell a soul, not even Mama.” He handed her the note with the address on it.

“Think of the location when you enter the fire. Don’t say it. Do you understand?” She handed the paper back to him nodding.

A few minutes later they both emerged from the fireplace at number twelve Grimmauld Place. There was yelling emanating from the kitchen. The two quietly peaked in the door to find Ron and Charlie playing a game of chess at the dinner table. Floating in the air above the sink, the dishes were being scrubbed and put away. Mrs. Weasley stood behind Ron, as did George, Hermione, Ginny and Dean. Behind Charlie stood only Fred who, to Harry’s relief, looked just like Fred always did. Still, Harry wondered why he stood alone behind Charlie. Was he deliberately being isolated? A moment later, Ron said, “Checkmate!” Everyone behind him cheered. George came round the table to his twin brother, holding out his hand, palm open.

“Pay up Fred,” he said, now holding out both hands.

“Er, double or nothing, next time they play?” Fred asked, as if he’d swallowed a lemon.

“Well, let me see,” said George pensively stroking his chin. “They’ve played every Christmas since Ron was old enough to know how to find the toilet. We’ve been betting on the game since he was old enough to know to pull his pants down first. You’ve always bet on Charlie, you’ve always lost, and you’ve always asked for double-or-nothing.”

“And you’ve always said yes,” encouraged Fred.

“Ah, but tonight we crossed a million galleons, and I’m starting to seriously doubt Charlie’s chess playing abilities. I think you should cut your losses.”

“But...”

“Harry!” Ginny squealed, seeing him at the door. She ran over and gave him a grand hug. “Gabriella! You made it!” She was beaming, but then the smile slipped off her face as she turned to Gabriella. “How are you doing?” she asked solemnly. “Harry told us about your friend. I’m so sorry.”

“We’re all sorry, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley kindly, giving Gabriella a hug. “Harry, it’s good to see you.” There was a coolness in her words that Harry had rarely heard from Mrs. Weasley, and never directed toward him. “Have you two eaten?”

“Yes, but thanks, Mrs. Weasley,” Gabriella responded graciously. She looked around the enormous kitchen. It was immaculate. “You have a lovely home.”

“Thank you, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley. “But we’re just guests. The home belongs to Harry.” Behind Gabriella’s back, Harry was trying to make a hand gesture to stop Mrs. Weasley from saying what she said, but it was too late.

“Harry’s?” Gabriella asked.

“Yes. He inherited it as a small part of his godfather’s estate.”

“Small part? Estate?”

“It... it’s not that much,” Harry jumped in. “Just some old beat up place in London.” But over the last few months, Mrs. Weasley had transformed the household into an elegant home.

"When we met," said Gabriella, poking Harry in the chest, "you said you didn't have two pounds to rub together."

"Well, I didn't," Harry shrugged innocently. "Just galleons."

"Oh!" she puffed, pushing his shoulders. "Well, what if you take me on a tour." Harry's face darkened slightly. To Gabriella, it may look like an elegant house, but for Harry it still pulled bitter memories to the surface.

"I'll show you," Hermione interjected brightly. "It's really quite unique in many ways. The Black family goes back for centuries. This house is magically located..." her voice trailed off as she and Ginny took Gabriella by each arm and left the kitchen. Harry was wondering if it might have been better for him to show the house when he turned around to find the rest of the Weasleys looking at him, all but Fred who was eating a slice of cake with Dean, and drinking a hot mug of coffee. It was an awkward moment.

"So, Ron here," George jumped off, "says you let Lucius Malfoy and his boy slip through your fingers." Harry's ears reddened.

"Nobody knows who was with Malfoy," answered Harry, coolly looking at Ron.

"Yeah," Fred muttered with a mouthful of cake, "that's what Hermione told us."

"And as for letting him slip through my fingers, I was pretty much unconscious when the whole thing happened."

"Yeah," Fred added, taking another bite. "Hermione told us that as well."

"And how are you, aside from hungry?" Harry asked, trying to turn the stares that were fixed on him.

"I don't know," Fred's eyes grew wide. "Since I've been bitten, seems I want to wolf everything down." His brothers and Dean laughed, but his mother did not take the comment well at all.

"Stop it!" Mrs. Weasley spat. "It's not funny!" The laughter stopped, and she turned on Harry. "And you! How you could let it happen! If I had a galleon for every one of my children that landed in hospital after traipsing along after you on one of your fool adventures.... They would follow you into the abyss if you asked, Harry. All my children adore you."

"Except Percy," George corrected.

"And Bill doesn't much care one way or the other for you, Harry," Fred added.

"I like you Harry," chimed in Charlie, "but I'm not sure about the abyss thing. Now if you have a problem with dragons..."

"Do you see?" Mrs. Weasley said exasperated, looking at Harry. "Ron and Ginny, Fred and George, I won't have you leading them to their deaths! I won't have you kill my children." Her voice was shaky and tears were welling in her eyes. Charlie took her by the arm and sat her down.

"It's war, Mum," he said softly, sitting at her side. "And, other than Albus Dumbledore, there's nobody I'd rather have leading the charge than Harry Potter."

"Face it, Harry," said George wryly, "he adores you too."

Seeing her sitting there, Harry's heart began to ache and huge emotions of guilt began to heave up from inside.

"Mrs. Weasley... Fred... I swear..." The door to the kitchen flung open. Harry expected to see Gabriella and Hermione, but instead it was Mr. Weasley, flanked by Percy and Alastor Moody. Mad-Eye was simply beaming; at least his face looked like it was beaming... sort of.

"We did it!" Mad-Eye yelled out. "Pass out the ale, boys! It's time for a celebration."

"What?" Ron asked. "What happened?"

"Dad's the new Minister of Magic," Percy said smugly.

"Acting Minister," Mr. Weasley corrected modestly. "Until we can hold a proper popular election, the council has given me the task." Mrs. Weasley stood, holding both hands over her mouth.

"I don't believe it," she gasped in disbelief. She, along with everyone else, stood and congratulated Mr. Weasley. She hugged him close. "Arthur, that's wonderful." But he could tell instantly what she was thinking.

"Yes Molly, the next Death Eater bulls-eye... as if things weren't already bad enough." He kissed her cheek and held her close. "We'll see it through. I promise." The door swung open again and in walked Hermione with Ginny.

"Where's..." Harry began, but Gabriella was next through, holding the arm of Tonks whose hair was a strawberry blonde. Tonks was smiling, but Gabriella was laughing.

"Really?" Gabriella chuckled. "That's what Hermione said. His first year?" Tonks smiled and nodded her head.

"Wotcher, Harry!" said Tonks. "I've finally had the chance to talk with your friend Gabriella. She's sweet. I can see why you've flittered most of the school year away talking about her and ignoring your studies." Harry could feel the room's eyes turn on him again, only this time he was blushing. "I've tried to convince her she should join us at Hogwarts, but her mind is set against it. Quite stalwart, she is." Hearing Tonks' words, Harry smiled with pride. Gabriella was all that and more.

Soon, food was spread about, and even those not yet of age were afforded the opportunity to cheer Mr. Weasley's new appointment with a glass of mead. Tapping Dean on the shoulder to follow suit, Ron reached to fill his glass again, but Mrs. Weasley slapped his hand. Much to Mad-Eye's disappointment, the conversation turned to lighter topics like Quidditch and musical groups. Ginny was holding Dean's hand and Hermione Ron's. The coolness that Harry felt on his

arrival had ebbed away. Gabriella was telling the story about how she first heard Harry was a criminal, when Tonks stood and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Harry," she said with a soft voice, "might I have a word?"

"Excuse me," said Hermione standing as well. "I need to use the bathroom." The three left the kitchen, Hermione turning left to the bathroom, Harry and Tonks turning right towards the Black Family study. Tonks watched as Hermione disappeared from sight and then closed the study door and locked it.

She seemed suddenly tired and shivered a little just before she flicked her wand starting the flames in the small fireplace in the corner of the room. It filled with a golden glow and the room became instantly more inviting. Of all the rooms at Grimmauld Place, this was the least touched by Mrs. Weasley. It contained almost everything that Harry thought Sirius would want to keep, but as he scanned the room Harry considered getting rid of the lot. It was time to move on.

"So, Harry," Tonks began as she sat back in one of the leather chairs, "do you have your gift?" Harry nodded. He'd been carrying it with him in his pocket since the day he opened the present. "And the riddle?"

"I'm really not good at riddles, Tonks," Harry moaned.

"Yes you are," she said keenly. She leaned forward looking intently at Harry. "I was certain that it would take us longer. I figured maybe we could work on it this summer together, but I underestimated you." She leaned back in her chair. "Justifiably so, I believe. There was no reason to raise your hopes, only to have them dashed again. Do you have it with you?" Harry pulled the golden rod from his pocket. He wasn't sure why he carried it with him as if it were something precious. Perhaps because it was from Tonks, but more likely because it was from Tonks and it was not the kind of gift that Tonks would normally give. "Excellent," said the witch with a smile as she took to her feet. She wandered over to the large mahogany case in which rested the collection of golden instruments, a collection of nefarious objects in the Black house that Harry had elected to keep. Immediately, Harry realized the rod had something to do with one of them, but which one

and what it would do he didn't know. His mind tried putting the riddle in context with what he was now seeing. Tonks stood staring at the golden objects, her back to Harry.

"Why did you save Lucius' life?" she asked. The question jarred Harry in an unexpected way.

"I-I didn't. He... he just..."

Tonks turned. "Did you let escape the one student, I thought you despised above all?"

Harry began to perspire, his face reddening, and the small fire feeling suddenly very warm. It required no Legilimens to know he was hiding something. Was Tonks thinking he had switched alliance?

"It's not what you think, Tonks," Harry pleaded, taking to his feet. "I swear, I didn't..."

"Did you save Lucius Malfoy's life?" she demanded. Her voice was stern, almost accusatory, but her eyes told a different story. What that story was, Harry couldn't decipher, but he also couldn't help but answer her honestly.

"Yes," he replied, looking to the floor. "I-I saved him."

"They say it almost killed you."

"I know," Harry nodded, still looking at his shoes. And then he looked up into her face, feeling as if he were speaking words of betrayal. "I couldn't let him die. Not like that. Not in front of..."

"Draco?"

Harry couldn't bring himself to saying yes. He simply nodded his head. Who was it, he wondered, that he was betraying? If Dumbledore were here now, would he see disappointment or pride? Instead he was looking back at Tonks whose eyes were, for a moment, unsure, but then glinted with the slightest of twinkles. She put her arms about Harry and hugged him, chuckling to herself.

"I think we can do it, Harry!" She patted him on the shoulders, and turned back to the mahogany cabinet. "But no one must know." Carefully she reached in and retrieved one of the larger golden objects. Bowl shaped, it was about the size of a washbasin. Around its thick edge was a moveable ring engraved with about a dozen runes that Harry did not recognize, at least not at first. One did, finally, catch his eye. He had seen it in the classroom at Hogwarts, on the cover of a textbook, two crossed lightning bolts--the Viswa Vajra. The image made him rub his forearm. Gently, Tonks set the heavy instrument on the desk. "I wonder how Lucius will feel if we succeed?" she asked herself.

"Feel?" Harry asked blankly.

"You saved his life, Harry, and now, although he doesn't know it, he's going to return the favor, at least we now have hope." Tonks held out her hand, and Harry placed the golden rod in her palm.

"Hope for what, Tonks?"

"Your compassion, Harry... Lucius Malfoy's blood... and a little luck," she slid the rod in an opening on the collar of the bowl and the ring began to rotate, "have given us a chance." It was like watching a roulette wheel spin. "A chance for my cousin... for your godfather... a chance to bring back Sirius Black."

Chapter 52 - Rescue

"I don't know how you can think that!"

"I don't know how you can think, at all! I'm telling you it's the Patonga Proudsticks! And if you don't believe it, you're an idiot."

"She's got you there, Ron."

"Yeah, at least the idiot part."

"I am not an idiot! The Cannons are coming back strong next year. With Wegley in as their newest Chaser, they'll have a shot at..."

"Wegley? She's a has-been from the Harpies. Sure she was great in the 80's, but she hasn't been able to fly straight since she took that Bludger to the head at the European Championships in Greece." Gabriella glanced up at the kitchen door, as she had every few minutes since Harry's departure, to find him standing there not moving. "Harry, what's wrong?"

She had wondered what was taking him so long. Some twenty minutes after he left with Tonks, all the adults retired for the evening. Gabriella sat at the kitchen table, and before long started talking Quidditch with the Weasley family. Dean was content to sketch with one hand, while he held Ginny's with the other. All of the Weasleys were agreeing with Gabriella's keen insight about the game. All, that is, except Ron who, in defending the Cannons, didn't notice that Hermione had never returned from the bathroom. He was distracted, probably because he was losing his debate and taking it firmly on the chin. Similarly, Harry looked as if he'd been punched in the gut a few times. His eyes were somewhat blank, his complexion extremely pale, and when Gabriella asked him once again how he was, he still didn't answer.

"Harry?" Gabriella repeated. Just as the question left her mouth, a hand reached up from behind, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Excuse me." It was Hermione, trying to enter into the kitchen as he stood in the doorway. "Excuse me, Harry." Slowly, Harry seemed to

come back to reality as if waking from a trance. "Looks like there's some pie left. Do you want some?"

"Er-- yeah," Harry muttered, trying to clear the thoughts filling his brain. "Pie's good."

"You're not looking well," Gabriella said taking to her feet. "You were in there quite some time."

"Gees, Harry," said Dean. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Let me cut you a slice," suggested Ginny.

"We probably should think about getting back," Gabriella said. "I really don't like leaving Mama alone too long." Without looking at her, Harry nodded into space.

"Right," he said blankly. "Home." Gabriella walked over and took his arm.

"It's been wonderful to see you all again. Please thank your mother for the desert."

"No problem," replied Ginny. "You're more than welcome anytime. And don't think you need Harry at your side to stop by."

Gabriella offered a pleasant smile. "You're cold," she whispered in Harry's ear. Then she looked over to the twins sitting at the far end of the kitchen table. "Fred, remember what I told you. If you can't find it, let me know. Mama grows some in the backyard." And then she sighed, "At least she did."

Hermione gave Gabriella a hug. "I hope we can talk more later," she said warmly. Then she turned to Harry and hugged him too, leaning close to his ear. "We need to talk... alone," she whispered, "...and soon." Gabriella overheard this, and had the sudden realization that Tonks was missing. She looked about the entryway hoping to catch sight of her as they walked to the fireplace, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Ron was the last to say goodbye before the two entered the fireplace. "You really need to set her straight about the Cannons, Harry." Ron's face was seriously concerned. "Clearly, she's been out of touch for far too long."

"Out of touch?" she exclaimed. "The only person I see who's out of touch is..." Harry grabbed her by the mouth, and a few moments later they emerged into number four, Privet Drive. It was a bit ironic to think that coming from Grimmauld Place to here, there would be a greater sense of disgust, but the living room looked like a disaster. What's worse, there was a definite odor beginning to build. Harry expected to see a scowl on Gabriella's face, but instead her eyes bore concern.

"I should get you to bed," she said sternly, taking Harry by the hand. Harry looked conflicted.

"Well... actually Gabriella, I'm a bit tired."

"Of course your tired. You clearly look ill. What's wrong, your stomach?" She moved to put her hand to his chest, but Harry pulled away.

"Just very tired. It's been... well, a full day. I really need to rest." He scanned the room. "A good night's sleep, and I can clean this place up tomorrow. I swear."

She narrowed her eyes, trying to bite her tongue about the room, and also to try and divine what Harry was holding back. It was true, he didn't look well."

"Okay," she kissed him briskly on the cheek. "But the Dursleys return in five days. And it's getting harder to clean by the minute." She pointed at a film of mold now growing on the coffee table.

When she left the house, and Harry shut the door, he collapsed to his knees on the floor. He had a chance to bring back Sirius, but nobody must know. Nobody, or they'd stop them for sure. His heart began to pound again, his palms began to sweat, and his breath grew shallow. Just thinking about the possibility was overwhelming. Slowly, he got

to his feet and ascended the stairs. He took off his shirt, tossing it to the floor as he gazed at the dragonhead with the ball of cinnabar in its mouth that now sat on his dresser. Then, turning to his bed, he found a scroll of parchment. Harry had left Hedwig at Hogwarts, and the window was closed. He reached down to pick up the note, then Mad-Eye's voice echoed in his head and he stopped, slipping out his wand. First, he walked to the closet, but it was empty. Then, he searched the entire upper floor. Exhausted, he returned to his room, and used the tip of his wand to open the note. It was from Hermione. How it got there, he had no idea -- perhaps the twins. He picked it up and read it under the light of the lamp on his dresser.

Harry,

Please, please, don't do anything until we can talk alone.

Hermione

He squeezed the parchment in his hands. She knew. She'd been eavesdropping. Anger began to roil up inside. He tore the paper into shreds, the pieces scattering across his bed. She'd ruin everything. He reached out and grabbed the red stone, accidentally slitting his finger on a tooth, and only serving to anger him more. "Damn her," he hissed, slamming the now glowing ball back and forth between his hands not noticing the blood coating his palms. He wouldn't let that happen. Still holding the stone, he sat on his bed.

It had been a long day... the funeral... revelations with Gabriella... news from Tonks. His body and his mind were exhausted, and he put head to pillow. If he were lucky, Hermione would be too late. He closed his eyes, his thoughts fixed on a large golden ring, the rune of the Viswa Vajra looking back at him. Perhaps, they had all they needed. Tonks would try soon. He had given her all she asked for, and would have given more if he could. His mind drifted to the film of Sirius falling into the veil, only this time, Harry pushed his hand through and pulled him out. "I'll bring you back, Sirius. I swear." Soon, his mind still spinning with the day's events, he was asleep.

He was angry. Furious. The brightest wizards and witches in the world, pure of blood, loyal with fear, and they had achieved nothing.

Ten wizards and three witches captured, countless allies dead, and they were no closer to achieving their objectives. "I must have more at my side, and soon I will have." His hand clawed in the shredded upholstery as it had countless times before. He was sick of this place, tired of waiting. But they weren't ready for the boy, not yet, but soon. "We have time," he thought to himself, trying unsuccessfully to control his nerves. He noticed silence in the corner.

"Did I tell you to stop, Longbottom?" he slithered in a high, cold voice. "Crucio!" Neville cried out in agony, but his throat had grown hoarse and raw. There were no screams left. In his hand was a paintbrush, in the other a paint can. He was now covered in blue, painting over a red wall. Slowly, Neville reached up and put bristles to board marking another blue swath of paint. "Very good. Tomorrow, I think green again."

He stood surveying the hellhole he was in. This wasn't like him. He had always been patient, silently moving among the shadows. His initial downfall was impatience, and he would not let that emotion creep back again. After all, time was on his side. Or was it? From what Lucius said the boy was growing stronger, but Bellatrix refuted the boy's strengths as simple tricks. "Exploding gum," he hissed, thinking of the dozen Death Eaters fooled by the childish trick. There was a quiet knock at the door.

"Enter," he spat. A robed and hooded Death Eater entered the room bowing low, only the robes this Death Eater was wearing were different -- not black, but purple and red. Ignoring the visitor, Neville continued to paint. "Where is the new minister," he asked coolly.

"The clock shows him at the Ministry, my lord."

"A minor inconvenience," he said, silkily. "Soon, there will be a proper minister. I'll see to that. Already our friends are on their way from the mountains." He stepped closer, and the Death Eater bowed low to the floor. "You left with purpose and you, for your part, have succeeded. With you now at my side the tide will change. You know now what to do?"

"Yes, my lord." The voice was not of a man, but of a woman's: familiar and comfortable.

"Excellent," he slowly hissed between his teeth. He watched as the Death Eater walked to the door, but Harry was not interested in this conversation, or the Death Eater. Where was Luna? How was Neville? He wanted to turn to see, and when he tried, Voldemort recognized his presence. "You!" he called without uttering a word, just as the door closed behind the departing cloaked figure. "You think you can visit uninvited?" Rage began to fill his every thought.

The scene changed. All was dark. Harry felt as if a giant snake was swallowing him head first. He couldn't see, but he heard Voldemort's voice.

"Your ability to hide grows stronger. I shall not let it happen again." Harry felt himself being pulled further into the snake. "I learned many things when I was your age, Harry. I learned about myself and who I was to become... what I was meant to be." The tone changed to a soft hiss. "Join me, Harry. Let me show you your immortality," Voldemort beckoned.

"Go to hell!" Harry yelled back with his mind.

"Oh, I've been there my boy. I've been there," the voice echoed in his mind. "If I can't destroy your body, I suppose your mind will do. Your future is finished."

Harry was being squeezed tighter, digested by the giant snake. He couldn't breathe and the pain about his chest was unbearable. At that moment, a warmth began to build in his fingertips that quickly spread up into his arms and filled his chest.

"Not-this-time-Tom," his mind forced back. He focused on the surrounding darkness and reached his mind out to find its strength... its energy. And there it was, flaming bright before him like an inferno raging against the darkness. Harry reached out and held it in his hand, but instead of infusing it with energy, he drew the energy away. It was coursing into his body, his mind, and then... agony. A blinding flash of light, and his forehead split open in tortured pain. He pulled his hands

away, and found himself falling from the darkness, falling from the light.

“You have the Heart!” hissed in horror across his mind, as he woke with a thump on the floor of his bedroom. Harry screamed. He screamed from the pain pounding in his head. He screamed from the filth coursing through his body. He gasped for air, and then realized an ultimate truth. Not filth... power! He could rule the world. An evil grin twisted Harry’s face thinking of all those he’d make pay. All the years he’d suffered, all the years of torture and mockery, they would all pay... a fierce retribution! Again, he gasped for air.

“No!” he cried.

Some poison was gripping his mind, consuming his very being. He had to get it out. His body shuddered, heaved, and the power vomited forth. His insides flashed bright, as if the light of a thousand suns burst open from his soul. Still screaming, the energy poured out of his body shattering through the window of his room and sending a beacon into the night sky. The wallpaper of his room peeled, and the paint on his furniture charred. Writhing in agony, the carpet beneath him smoldered, filling the room with an acrid smoke that plumed out his shattered window. It lasted only a few seconds, but the torture felt like hours. Then, suddenly, the power collapsed inward driving back from the sky, back into the window, and plummeting into the ball of cinnabar clutched tightly in his hands. He watched as it glowed red, then white. The muscle spasms in his arms stopped, his hands let go of the stone, and it fell to the floor rolling next to the bottom of his dresser. When it was over, he fell unconscious, eyes open, on the smoking floor. But it was not a dreamless sleep. He was locked in silent battle, staring at two red eyes that looked back, unblinking. But, they were not the eyes of Voldemort; they were his own.

He woke to Gabriella yelling his name. It was distant at first, a soft beckoning from across the horizon, almost imperceptible as the red eyes flamed back at him. But it grew stronger, louder, until finally the red eyes blinked and disappeared. With the sound of her voice, and the withdrawal of his opponent, Harry finally shut his eyes. They burned. Tears began to stream down the sides of his face, and he

squinted up to see the darkened ceiling of his bedroom, and Gabriella kneeling over him. He made to sit up, but she stopped him.

“Don’t move,” she said sternly, and then she firmly placed her hands over his face. It was as if his eyes were being washed in a refreshing bath of water. She let go, and he opened his eyes, now clearly able to see the devastation. It was fortunate that Hedwig was gone. The papers that had lined her cage were nothing more than ash. Harry sat up, peeling himself away from the melted carpet beneath him. The clouds seemed to open up as the morning sun beamed in through the window. “I thought I’d let you sleep, but when I came out for the paper I saw your window. What happened?” she asked, her voice shaky.

“I’m a lousy Occlumens,” he whispered, rubbing his temples.

“You... you linked again?”

“He was killing me. So I... I don’t know. I guess the opposite of what I did for Professor Dumbledore. Instead of giving him the energy, I...”

“No!” she yelled sharply.

“He was killing me,” was all Harry could find to say. She grabbed his face and gazed intently into his eyes.

“Give me your hands!” she commanded, now straddling his legs on the floor. He obliged and she examined them as if inspecting pieces of fruit for ripeness. She was whispering something under her breath, and he felt his hands grow cold, and then warm again. Finally, she let go. “Nothing,” she breathed in amazement. “You kept none of it.”

“None of what?” Harry asked, reaching back to hold her hands. The room was a disaster, but his head was clearing, and he kind of liked her on his lap.

“Whoever, or whatever you connected to, you’ve drained it of its life force,” she answered with a voice that now seemed somewhat older. “How much I cannot say.” She placed her hand gently on his face. “But it should have become part of you. Such is the power of the eye.” Still sitting over Harry, she reached over and grabbed the stone

from next to the dresser, and looked at it closely. "The temptation to hold such power has destroyed many. It has driven countless men mad with the voices they consume." She shook her head, but then a smile opened across her face. "But you... you rejected the temptation." She held her hand over his heart, and smiled. But then she sensed something else. She pressed her hand more firmly against Harry's chest, but he took her by the wrist and sat up.

"I-I didn't know that I had any choice," answered Harry. But inside, he knew he did have the choice, and it was his choice that made him wretch out such power. In that moment of realization, he felt for the first time, in some small way he had on his own terms defeated Voldemort. It was not luck, or happenstance, a gift passed down. It was instead his choice, his to take, his to reject. There on the floor, with Gabriella on his lap, Harry Potter took one grand step toward becoming who he was meant to be. He pulled her close, and as she wrapped him in her arms.

Holding her there, the cold wind blowing through the broken window of his room, he began to replay the dream. For the first time, he saw in Voldemort's eyes a look other than arrogance, or cruelty. He saw something akin to fear. Harry also felt that the Dark Lord now lay somewhere, injured. "The clock," he whispered in Gabriella's ear. Suddenly flashes of all his dreams came careening into his mind like flashing photos lit by a strobe. The gnomes, the garden, the clock, the upstairs room. "The Burrow," he said, looking into Gabriella's eyes. He's taken them to the Burrow.

In the few minutes it took for Harry to put on fresh clothes, grab his pack, and run downstairs to the fireplace, he had quickly explained all he knew, all he thought he knew to Gabriella. It was the clock, the Weasley family clock that always indicated their location that tied the fragments in his mind together. Luna and Neville were there, they must be. And now... now they had a chance to strike. Voldemort was weak.

"You can't go there by yourself, Harry!" Gabriella exclaimed, concerned about his sudden zealotry to rescue his friends. If you're right, it will be crawling with his... his Death Eaters. Harry looked at her.

"What did Cho say? Brash idiots?" Harry smiled

"Fools," Gabriella corrected, nervously.

"Fools," Harry nodded. "Not this time. I'm just going to tell Mr. Weasley and I'll be back."

"Then let me come with you," she said.

"No. It's too..." he hesitated.

"Yes?" she asked, narrowing her eyes. Harry rolled his.

"Alright. But it'll only be a minute. You'll see."

Gabriella cast one more look out the front window at her house across the street, and stepped into the fireplace. They stepped out at Grimmauld Place, the air filled with the smell of browning sausages. Quickly, they ran to the kitchen, only to find Ron and Hermione alone at the table eating breakfast.

"Where is everyone?" Harry cried in disappointment.

"Good to see you too, mate," Ron smiled, chomping on a slice of toast. "Gabriella," he mumbled with his mouth full.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked cautiously.

Seeing her there, reminded him of her letter. And that, in-turn, reminded him of the possibility that Sirius might be released today. But that was up to Tonks. His job now was to save Neville and Luna. He felt like saying something nasty, but Gabriella was holding his arm. It had a calming effect.

"I know where they are! I know where he's keeping them."

"Who?"

"Neville, and Luna."

The second the names left Harry's mouth, Ron and Hermione cast each other a glance then looked away. Harry didn't understand. Why weren't they cheering with excitement, or begging to know where? Instead, Hermione simply pushed her plate forward on the table and stood. Harry had to make them understand.

"They're at the..."

"The Burrow," Hermione interrupted. Her voice was sad.

Her words hit Harry squarely in the jaw. She knew. They both knew. He staggered backward, and Gabriella held him to keep him from falling over. How could they know and not do anything about it?

Gabriella pulled Harry upright, and faced Hermione. "You're afraid," she said flatly.

"Afraid?" Hermione asked with a melancholy tone. "Yes, we're all afraid. Professor Snape's known their location for some time, Harry. Since then, Ron's dad has had everyone brainstorming to find a way in and out of the Burrow that won't put them in danger." Her explanation was honest, but Harry was glaring at her, wondering if he really knew the person that was speaking. "Even Professor Dumbledore is afraid that if we go bursting in, he'll kill Neville and Luna first."

It took a moment, and then Harry felt as if the floor was turned on its side. Of course, Snape would know, and of course any assault on the Burrow by the Ministry would mean many deaths. The first to die would be Neville and Luna, Voldemort would make sure of that. He was breathing hard, casting glances from Hermione to Ron and back again. Ron just looked down at the kitchen table. It all made sense, but the anger or frustration was welling up again, and he couldn't stop it. Unable to fix the predicament, he lashed out at his friends.

"You knew? You knew and you didn't tell me?" he spat. Then he walked over to Ron, towering over him as he sat. "No more secrets, eh, mate?"

“Stop it, Harry!” It was Gabriella.

“They lied!” he yelled back, begging for indictment. “They had me suffering over how I might find my friends, while they knew all the time!” He kicked over a kitchen chair. Gabriella, however, was unaffected by the outburst. She strode over to him and grabbed his arm.

“Do you have a link with the Phantom or not?” she asked calmly, but with a bit of a bite.

“Yes, but...”

“And if he discovered, how you found out about his location... not by his own doing but by this, Professor Snape, would that not place the Professor’s life in danger, as well as the lives of your friends?” The fire faded from Harry’s eyes.

“Yes,” he said, sitting on the bench next to Ron, but facing away from the table.

“We’ve only known for awhile. We wanted to tell you, Harry,” Hermione said pleadingly. “We were eavesdropping on Ron’s dad, and when he caught us he swore us to secrecy.” Harry still just glared at Hermione. He hated what she had just said, more than she could possibly know. He was being left out of what was clearly his future. For a long while nobody said a word until Gabriella bent down on one knee next to Harry and adjusted the collar on his new coat, pulling the zipper up.

“You must now save them, Harry.” Her words were even and direct. Ron spun on the bench to face her.

“Didn’t you hear what we just said?” he cracked. “There’s Death Eaters crawling all over my house. They’ll kill anything that walks through the door.”

“But Harry now knows all the things you’ve kept hidden. And the same reasoning applies, does it not?” she asked. “If the connection is

real, the Phantom may ask how you know, and then your Professor, and your friends might lose their lives the next time Harry sleeps.”

“Let’s just wait until Mr. Weasley returns tonight,” said Hermione. “He’ll know...”

“There isn’t time!” Harry shot, standing from the bench. “He’s sick now. I don’t know for how long. This will be our only chance.”

“Who’s sick?” Ron asked.

“Voldemort!”

Ron cringed at the name, but he didn’t ask how Harry knew, nor for that matter did Hermione. For once they were taking him at his word. Hermione folded her arms, and pondered the situation carefully.

“If we tell the Ministry, they’ll want to go in full force. Remus could use stealth, and so could Shacklebolt, but they’re on a mission together somewhere. Dumbledore might...”

“Dumbledore will say no,” Harry interrupted.

“I suppose we go in by floo?” she asked.

“You’re not going anywhere,” said Harry, stepping to the kitchen doors. I’m not going to let what happened last year happen again. If he’s recovered, we’ll all be dead.”

“You’re not going alone,” Ron said empathically.

Hermione was still steeped in thought. “I’d rather we had a portkey, to get out quickly if we needed to.”

“I said you’re not going!”

“They’ll be watching the floo, I’d imagine,” said Gabriella, walking over to the stove. “Or have someone close by. If the Phantom has fallen ill, however, it may be enough of a distraction. If only there was a way to see without being seen.”

Harry cast Gabriella a look, and then glanced at his pack. He'd brought his invisibility cloak, with that purpose in mind. He was trying to think of what to tell Gabriella, when Hermione slipped out the kitchen door.

"Hermione," Harry yelled, pushing the door open himself, "you're not going, and that's..." She was gone. "Hermione!" he called, looking in the study.

"She's probably in the bathroom is all," said Ron, a bit nervously. "Look, mate, even with your cloak on, it might be trapped. You could stick your head in the fire and have it blasted off your shoulders. It's too..." He stopped and turned to look at Gabriella. Her eyes were fixed on him, as if examining a strange bug crawling up the side of his head.

"Yes," Ron whispered out loud. There was a pause. "I don't know." Harry looked at Ron and then to Gabriella. Ron nodded his head. "Why not," he shrugged. The redhead walked over to the fireplace, and grabbed some floo powder off the mantle. "Gabriella thinks I can reach out with my mind and see if anyone's there. Never done it, so I don't know if it'll work."

"If someone is there, Ron," said Gabriella, "you'll know their presence."

"Nothing foolish, okay?" Harry added. "Pull your brain out, or whatever, if something goes wrong."

Ron sprinkled the powder and called for the Burrow, but instead of stepping into the fire he reached out with his mind. "I can't see anything," he whispered. Gabriella touched his shoulder. "Whoa! Colors." Suddenly, his posture changed. It was as if he was channeling all he saw, experienced, back to Grimmauld Place.

"I can see the front room, and," he turned his head as if actually looking to the side, "the kitchen. I feel like I could just walk on in." He suddenly jerked back. "There's one, sitting at the kitchen table." He

turned to look up to the right. "One's coming down the stairs." Then Ron's voice changed, taking on the intonation of those speaking.

"Quit crying, and get up here!" he said in a low voice. "If you don't help me get him down the stairs now, I'LL kill you myself." Then in his own voice, "They're running up the stairs." There was a silence, and suddenly Ron began to tremble. "They're levitating him... through the kitchen. Again the low voice of the Death Eater spoke. "Bellatrix says sunlight. Sounds crazy to me. He hasn't seen the sun since we got here." A moment later, Ron pulled his thoughts back, and returned to Grimmauld Place. At the same time, Hermione appeared, from where he didn't notice.

"They're out the door," Ron said weakly. He was looking a bit peaked. "We have to go now!" he said, rubbing his temples. "Follow me." Before anybody could say a word to stop him. Ron and his body were on their way to the Burrow.

"Damn it!" Harry spewed. "I told him that..." he spotted that Hermione had a leather purse about her shoulder that he'd never seen before, just as she reached for some floo powder from the mantle. "You're not..." But too late. She called to the Burrow and was gone leaving Harry alone with Gabriella. "This is not how it's supposed to happen!" he yelled.

"Harry," Gabriella said with a tremor in her voice, "don't let anyone know you're there, or the next time you link, he'll ask how." He could tell she was trying to stay calm, but was having troubles. "Fight strength with wile." She kissed him on the lips. "I love you."

"We'll get them out safe," he said, and hugged her quickly. He grabbed some floo powder and threw it into the fire. "The Burrow!" There was a flash and immediately he found himself in Ron's living room. The redhead, wand drawn, was already ascending the stairs. Hermione only a few steps behind. When they looked back at Harry, he pointed up, and mouthed the word 'attic'.

There were voices outside. Yelling. It was Bellatrix. He heard a wand, and the screaming. Harry felt his innards begin to twist. He pulled his wand and turned away from the stairs and toward the kitchen.

“Harry,” Hermione breathed. He stopped to look. “We need you,” she said, under her breath, waiving him over. He looked to the kitchen, then went back to help his friends.

The boards on the stairs squeaked and cracked with every step. Harry was sure they’d be overheard, but no one came. More likely, the Death Eaters were all hovering about their leader trying to figure out what might have happened. When he arrived he expected to see the house torn apart, but it wasn’t. In fact, with everyone outside, one would hardly be able to tell it was a Death Eater stronghold. The only clue was a set of dark robes thrown over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. They wanted it to look untouched, he thought, the better to hide. As they climbed to the first level, Hermione suggested that they should check the bedrooms. Harry pointed upstairs, but Ron was already headed down the hallway to his room. Grinding his teeth, Harry followed.

All the doors were opened, the rooms were empty, and everything looked untouched. The three friends shrugged their shoulders, shook their heads and again Harry pointed upwards. Ron led the way. Just as Harry was leaving Ron’s room he noticed it. On the floor, partially covered by the bedcover was a red hood. Hermione started down the hall after Ron, but Harry walked in and picked up the hood. It was a deep scarlet, and made of silk. There were no holes for eyes. Harry held it in his hand for a moment, then slipped it on. He could see clearly, as if the hood wasn’t even there. He slipped it off ready to join the ascent to the attic, when he noticed a few long strands of blonde hair. He held them in his hand, and rubbed them between thumb and finger. Draco was here. Was that a good thing? There was a crack, and quickly he turned expecting to see Draco in the corner, but found no one.

Harry wasn’t sure what to think. In some ways he felt he’d led Draco back into his father’s arms... or arm. His emotions began to twist, for letting Lucius escape. Where was the Death Eater? Where was Draco? He could feel his heart begin to race, for all the wrong reasons. He took a deep breath trying to regain his composure. Tossing the hood back on the floor he went out into the hall. Ron and Hermione had already disappeared from sight. From upstairs, there

was a large squeak as a door opened. From the bottom landing, Harry was immediately hit with the strong smell of paint. And then a familiar voice, faint, but clear.

"I knew you'd be the first," she said quietly. "Dad says the Ministry can't do anything right." She coughed. "Where's Harry?"

"I'm right here." Harry entered the attic. Chained to the wall, her feet not touching the ground, was Luna. It looked as if she'd not eaten in days, but her eyes were clear, and when she saw Harry, a thin smile creased her gaunt face. Hermione was at her side, releasing her from the bonds. There was a lone chair in the middle of the room. Seeing it, a shiver ran down Harry's back. Huddled in the far corner clutching a blue paintbrush was Neville. His eyes were staring blankly at the wall. Ron had made to walk over to him, but stopped. Turning from Luna to Neville, Harry wondered why Ron wasn't moving, and then he saw why. Coiled between Neville and Ron was Nagini, her head some four feet off the ground glaring into Ron's eyes. Her tongue flicked as she rose higher.

"Fressssh meat," she hissed.

Harry jumped in front of Ron. "Hasheth!" he slithered in parseltongue. "Move aside." The snake did not strike, but it did not move either. It now glared into Harry's eyes. Harry glared back, allowing his eyes to transform, to change into the eyes she had always obeyed. "Move aside." She lowered her head in something of a bow, and coiled herself about the chair in the middle of the room.

Ron ran over to Neville's side, but when the boy in blue saw him coming, he recoiled in fear. "No!" he rasped, holding his paintbrush up for protection.

"It's me Neville. Ron... Ron Weasley." The redhead held out his hand, but still Neville shook with fear.

"Leave me, alone!"

Hermione had Luna down from the wall, but she was too weak to stand on her own. "He won't touch you," she said. Her voice was weak, but her wits were clear. "His mind is gone."

"No!" Harry spat. "It's not. It can't be!" Hermione shushed him. He walked over to Ron's side, but his approach only aggravated Neville more. He started to try and strike Harry and Ron with his paintbrush, only his arm was so weak he couldn't raise it above his shoulders.

"We need to get him to hold the portkey with the rest of us," Hermione said, reaching into her bag. Harry turned his head.

"Portkey? Where did you..."

"Ron can you just hold his hand?" she interrupted. Ron held out his hand and tried to grab Neville's arm, but Neville kicked him hard in the stomach. Ron flew back and landed hard on the floor, knocking over the bucket of paint. The rattling noise was loud, and for a moment nobody moved. And then they heard it, a squeak from below. Someone was climbing the stairs. Neville rose to his feet, and started for the door. Hermione had Luna in her arms, Ron was on the floor, and Harry pulled his wand out ready to attack the ascending Death Eater. Hermione pulled her own wand to paralyze Neville, when he stopped on his own.

"Ron?" Neville rasped. From the floor, Ron was focusing on Neville. Reaching out to his mind with his own. Somehow he pierced the clouds of thought. "Harry?" he breathed again.

"Quickly," Hermione hissed. "Over here!" Ron stood up, and put his arm about Neville. Together they walked over and sat next to Hermione and Luna. "Harry!"

But, it was too late. Whoever was climbing the stairs was upon them. In that instant, Harry recalled Gabriella's advice, and put his hands over his face, and stepped into the doorway, closing the door behind. Just then, not one, but two cloaked and hooded figures appeared before him.

"Master Malfoy?" the Death Eater in front asked. "What's going on? You know you're not allowed up here." They were both advancing toward him, though only the figure in front spoke, the other some four steps behind. "Leave at once, or your father will hear about this."

"I-I'm sorry," said Harry, in his best Draco drawl. "I heard screams." The Death Eater began to laugh. "I heard screams, I swear," Harry repeated.

"As if that were ever an excuse. Come with me, boy. Now!" The lead Death Eater pulled his wand.

And then something odd happened. The figure following from behind lifted his hand and stroked down hard with a chop onto the lead Death Eater's neck, and he fell out cold at Harry's feet. The figure stepped over the heap on the stairs and stood before Harry as he held his wand high.

"I like the new coat, but I much prefer green eyes," she said lightly, but out of breath.

"Gabriella?"

She pulled the hood off her head. Her face was beaming as if she was infused with energy from the fight. "I've been watching. When I saw him climb the stairs, I thought I'd follow." She held up the hood in her hand. "I picked this up off the table downstairs," she said, throwing off the cloak onto the floor. "Where are they?"

"In-Inside," he stammered, looking at her handiwork on the floor. "You're brilliant," Harry smiled, kissing Gabriella's cheek.

"Can I have Harry back?" she asked, not taking the kiss very well.

"Oh, sorry." Again, the sound of people climbing the stairs echoed through the house. Quickly, Harry transformed back. "Hermione has a portkey," he said, opening the door.

"How convenient," Gabriella said in a curious tone as she stepped into the attic. She jumped seeing the snake, but Harry put his arm

around her and together they stooped down onto the floor with the rest of their friends. Ron and Hermione were both surprised to see Gabriella, but there was no time for questions.

“On three,” said Harry briskly.

He felt his navel being pulled from behind, and when the spinning stopped they had arrived on a black granite floor -- St Mungo's. They were all still seated on the floor, much as they were in the attic at the Burrow. Neville in Ron's arms, Luna in Hermione's. Harry looked up. It was a large empty ward, except for three healers standing over them and one graying wizard... Professor Dumbledore.

Chapter 53 - Awakenings

“Three... Two... One... Happy New Year!”

Champagne glasses clinked, kisses shared, and hugs more plentiful than the chocolate frogs under Harry's floorboards. The kitchen in Grimmauld place was packed to overflowing with wizards and witches from the Order. Many, Harry had never seen before. There was another pat on Ron's back. Everyone was grinning from ear to ear, and even Remus seemed giddy with happiness. Again, another pat on Ron's back. Though the morning looked destined for disaster, the day had gone spectacularly well. Another pat, and this time Ron winced. Harry knew Ron's scars were already swollen, and he wondered how much worse they were getting from everyone congratulating him.

It was odd not being the center of attention; a small part of him was jealous. After all, it was his idea. If it weren't for him, Neville and Luna would still be locked away. But in a day of miracles, the rescue of his classmates was already overcome by events. Mrs. Weasley quickly gathered up the champagne glasses from the youth in the room. When she took the glass out of Harry's hand, her eyes were quite cool. Once again, Harry had led her son into danger, although he wondered how she could think that, since the story had been told a dozen times of how Ron was the first to enter the Burrow, and how he was first to enter Voldemort's lair, although he still couldn't say the name himself.

The room was buzzing with the name Ron. Ron this... Ron that... interspersed with the occasional 'Frank' or 'Alice', and the redhead seated in the center of the room, still pale from the day's events, was soaking it up. He had spent the last six years in Harry's shadow and before that his own brothers'. Now the limelight was brightly shining in his face and Harry hoped he wouldn't get too sunburned.

“It is a blessing, when we turn our curses into gifts,” whispered Gabriella in Harry's ear. The room was noisy and it was hard to hear. Harry nodded, but weighed the gift against the curse and wondered which would win in the end.

They had arrived at St Mungo's, and Neville began screaming madly, but Ron was able to calm him with his mind. Over the course of the morning, Ron could communicate with Neville in a way that no one else was able. By lunch, with Ron's help Harry was talking to Neville, and soon his mind seemed completely free of the agony placed on it by Voldemort's Cruciatus curse. It was mid afternoon when a healer in red robes came down and called Ron out into the hallway. A look of fear came across Ron's face, and at first he said he couldn't do it.

"Do what?" Harry asked.

"My head's already pounding, Harry," he whispered. "I really had to concentrate on Neville. I tell you... my head's pounding." Harry looked at the back of his neck, and saw that the scars were raised and red.

"What do they want you to do?"

"The Longbottoms," Ron swallowed.

"You can't be serious?"

"Try at least," Ron shrugged.

"You know what happened when..."

"Yeah, I know," Ron interrupted. He pulled his fingers through his red hair and sighed. "Will you come? Maybe stop me if I go too far?"

"How 'bout I stop you right now?" Harry scolded, but Ron looked back with solid eyes. He was going with or without Harry, and so Harry climbed the stairs with his friend and the healer.

It was agony watching Ron contort in pain. The room was silent, as Ron sat holding Alice Longbottom's hand. Her gray hair hung down about her shoulders, and the lines of her face showed a pain that dared not speak its name. At first, she was frightened when Ron reached to her with his mind, but then she calmed. Then, although Ron seemed to wince every so often, Alice was quiet, occasionally nodding her head and smiling. Her husband Frank was oblivious to

what was happening. He was speaking to an imaginary someone or something in a landscape portrait on the wall.

The scars on the nape of Ron's neck began to stretch like fingers about his ears. Again Ron winced in a silent burst of pain, and this time Harry decided enough was enough. He stood and walked over to stop the mind meld when it happened. Alice opened her eyes and held her hand to the side of Ron's face.

"Well, of course you're a Weasley," she said quietly. "Look at that hair. Your father's was much longer at your age. Where is Arthur anyway?" They were the first cogent sentences she had put together in fifteen years.

The healer gasped. Ron, eyes closed, was still trying to link, his face contorted in distress.

"Ron?" Harry called. There was no answer. "Ron!" Finally, he blinked and looked up, not at Harry, but at the Healer.

"You know, I hate the chicken dumplings here, and would you tell Millicent to brush her teeth?" he complained in an affected voice. He let go of Alice's hand, and fell backwards into Harry's arms. He was pale, weak, and trembled slightly.

"My god, Vincent!" said Alice Longbottom, looking straight at the healer in red. "You're a healer, aren't you? Help the poor lad!"

Flabbergasted, Vincent quickly gave Ron a potion that helped with the pain, and calmed his nerves. Then, he treated his back, bathing it in a blue light. The swelling lessened slightly, but Harry could see that the scars that had taken weeks to reduce were now back worse than ever. Everyone, including Mrs. Longbottom, wanted Ron to wait at least a day before trying to reach into Frank Longbottom's mind, but he was insistent.

"I can do this," he said determinedly.

Two hours later, Frank and Alice were holding each other tightly. Their minds weren't all together clear, but with each passing minute

another layer of fog seemed to lift from their memories. It was as if they had been released from a fifteen-year immobilus hex. They remembered all the attempts at treatment, all the visits, all the stories that Gran had told them of the events in the world, all the times Neville...

"Neville..." Alice Longbottom said in a soft voice. "Where's Neville? He... He's about your age I believe." No sooner had she asked, than the door swung open and their son walked in followed by his grandmother and another healer in red.

"Mum?" he asked in disbelief. For the first time that he could remember, he looked up to find blue eyes that looked back with recognition. Her graying hair seemed somewhat darker and healthier, and the lines about her eyes weren't lines of pain, but of joy. "Mum?" he asked, stepping cautiously into the room. She smiled broadly, and opened her arms wide, and in an instant Neville was holding her tight.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered to her son. "I... I..." she broke down in tears, holding the son she had watched grow into a man, unable to tell him how much she loved him, only able to give him a simple token of how proud she was of the man he was becoming.

Frank Longbottom looked for the longest time at his own mother standing by the door. She was stunned, unable to take in what she was seeing. Frank flashed her the smile that had charmed many a witch and wizard in his youth, and then stepped over to his son. "S-So you're a G-Gryffindor, eh?" His words were shaky, but his thoughts clear. "I used to s-sneak your mum into the Gryffindor c-common room after hours. C-cost me a month of detentions when I was caught. Did your Gran ever tell you?" Neville looked at his dad and shook his head smiling.

"Of course, I didn't!" Gran Longbottom puffed. "Why would I fill the boy's head with such a terrible example of behavior?"

One of the healers tapped Harry on the shoulder. Looking to his side, Ron had fallen asleep. Together, Harry and the healer took Ron out of the room for treatment, as the Longbottoms began a reunion of a lifetime.

They were halfway down the hall when the door burst open and Neville ran down to meet them.

"Is he okay?" Neville asked with concern.

"Yes, he's okay," said Ron smugly, trying to stand taller, but still holding tightly to Harry's arm.

"I owe you Ron," said Neville solemnly. "You too Harry. As long as I live..."

"Get back in there, Neville," said Harry determinedly.

"That's right," Ron added. "You don't owe us anything." Then Ron smiled. "Except maybe a nice plant for Mum. She was a bit chafed no one gave her flowers for Christmas." Neville grinned, and ran back to join his family. Ron slumped the moment Neville left, and for the next few hours the healer became the patient.

Now, he sat in the middle of the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, and whatever fatigue or pain he was experiencing, Harry couldn't tell. Ron was all smiles, surrounded by the Order of the Phoenix. When word got out about the rescue, nearly all of them had apparated en masse at the Burrow. They found the Weasley home empty. Then word came that the Longbottoms, though still at St. Mungo's for observation, had miraculously recovered. Nearly everyone now in the kitchen had gone by to visit them. Between the clinking of glasses and mugs, all were sharing stories of times past when the Longbottoms and the Potters carried the day for the Order. They were stories Harry had never heard before, stories of defiance and victory over Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

It was Mad-Eye who turned toward Harry and raised his glass. "To James and Lily Potter!"

"Here-Here!" the room called out, and then drank to his parents' memory.

Harry tried to smile, but found himself clenching his teeth, and squeezing Gabriella's hand far too tightly.

"Come on," she said, pulling him to the door, as the group once again placed their attention upon Ron. The two emerged into the entryway where a handful of members were quietly chatting. It was cooler out here, and Harry took in a deep breath. "You hate that, don't you?" Gabriella asked. Harry nodded.

"I never knew my parents. I never will."

"No?" questioned Gabriella. "Mama says when we pass on we leave behind an imprint of ourselves in all those whose lives we've touched. I think that, tonight, I've met your parents. They were brave, and kind, and most of all, they loved their son very, very much." Harry said nothing, but nodded ever so slightly. Again, he took a deep breath.

"Neville got his parents back today," he said. "Mine are gone forever." Then he took Gabriella by the arm and led her in toward the study. "But, there's someone I can bring back," he whispered, excitedly. "I thought I'd hear by now."

"Bring back?" Gabriella asked, confused.

"Yes," he said, with a smile that reminded Gabriella of his expression before crashing the motorcycle late last summer. "That's probably why she's not here right now."

"Who?"

"I gave her my blood. I would have thought..."

"Your blood?" she exclaimed.

"She needed it for..."

"Hi, guys." Hermione walked in through the study doors. "Terribly hot in the kitchen, don't you think?"

"Hi, Hermione," Gabriella answered kindly. "It's a shame we can't open the front door, and keep it open, don't you think?"

"That would be nice," Hermione said, fanning herself, and flopping down in one of the chairs. Harry just glowered, ready to explode, but Gabriella squeezed his arm.

"Do you think any of the Order might be able to find a way to cool the house off? Certainly, one of them would be capable," Gabriella suggested.

"I don't think we need the Order," Hermione replied, a bit put off. "Properly placed, a simple cooling charm would work."

"Really?" Gabriella replied with interest. "I've never seen such a charm." Hermione rose and pulled her wand.

"Right outside the kitchen will do the trick, you'll see... just a moment." The moment Hermione stepped out the doorway, Gabriella unzipped Harry's sleeve and pulled out his invisibility cloak. When Hermione returned they were gone. "Harry? Gabriella?" She looked about for a bit then turned back toward the door. "Damn," she hissed, and stepped out.

Gabriella was holding Harry from behind when she pulled him backwards against the wall, and together they quietly slid down to the floor. One hand was against his waist the other against his chest.

"That was brilliant," he giggled.

"I thought... last night," Gabriella began. "I knew something was wrong, but you pulled your hand away." Her fingers were pressing into his chest and the feeling was not comfortable.

"Hey, that kinda..."

"Tell me who drained your blood," she said with a fierce edge in her voice. "Hermione?"

“No! Are you kidding? And she didn’t drain me. It’s not like she’s a vampire or something.”

“WHO?” She pressed her fingers further into his skin. There was a nerve there, and a sudden burning sensation spread across his chest.

“Tonks, okay? Tonks.” Gabriella softened the pressure. “She found a way to bring my godfather, her cousin, back from behind the curtain. She said... she said today it would be done, but no one’s seen her. Something must have gone wrong.” Harry relaxed, leaning back against Gabriella.

“There are very few arts that ask for blood, and nearly all of them are dark. Are you sure she can be trusted?” Harry didn’t answer the question. Instead he asked his own.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” he exclaimed. “She’s going to bring back Sirius.”

There was a distant, but familiar creak, as the front door to Grimmauld Place swung open. A draft of cold air swirled in the study. A voice called, “Harry!” There was banter out in the entranceway.

“Nymphadora, how grand to see you! My you’ve grown.”

“Fine to see you too, sir. Have you seen Harry?”

“I believe he’s in the kitchen.”

Harry pulled to get up, but Gabriella held him fast. He couldn’t move. “Harry, there’s something not right about this.”

“That’s crazy,” he hissed.

“Do you trust me?” she asked quietly. There was no response. “Wait until she comes into the study. She’s looking for you, so she will. When you show yourself, see how she reacts.” Gabriella released her grip, but Harry stayed seated with her on the floor. They listened as Tonks tried the kitchen, called upstairs, then finally walked into the study. Finding it empty, she slammed the door and cursed turning her

back to the two beneath the invisibility cloak, and pounding her forehead against the wood of the door.

“No, oh no, oh no,” she muttered to herself over and over. Gabriella poked Harry in the side of the ribs, and he slipped out from under the cloak. Tonks heard the sound and spun wildly, her wand pointed directly at Harry’s eyes.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed holding up his hands. “Bit fast on the draw there, aren’t you Tonks?”

“HARRY!” she breathed. Then she narrowed her eyes looking behind him. “But I’ve been calling.”

“Yeah, people have been hounding me all day. I just curled up under the cloak and took a nap. Sorry,” he said, feigning a yawn, lifting his glasses with one hand and rubbing his eyes with the other. “So, have you tried yet?”

Tonks was clearly agitated. She had a look of panic in her eyes that Harry had never seen before. It took her some time before she finally lowered her wand. “No. Yes. I... I tried. It didn’t work,” she said completely frustrated. The revelation struck Harry hard, and he fell into the moment.

“It didn’t work? But I thought...”

“I know!” Tonks yelled. She fell into one of the chairs, covering her face with her hands. “I know.”

“I should have been there to help you. I should have...”

“No,” Tonks snapped, standing again. The movement was unnatural. “No. That... that would be too risky.”

“Did you set the right code? I mean, maybe if you...”

“Yes, damn it! Everything was the way it was supposed to be.” She began to pace the room, and at one point Harry thought for sure she would trip over Gabriella hidden in the corner. “Your blood, Malfoy’s

blood, the basin, the code... it was perfect. It should have worked, but nothing. Now... now I'm in trouble."

"Trouble?" Harry asked. "What do you mean? No one knows but me, right? They didn't see you, did they?"

"What?" Tonks muttered distracted. "No, they didn't see me." She took a long deep breath trying to steady her nerves. "Don't listen to me, Harry. I'm just a bit nervous is all. I thought we would have them... er... him tonight. I thought my cousin, your godfather would return." The room was cooling, but still a bit too warm for Harry. Even so, Tonks walked over to the fire. The flames flickered high, and the embers burned hot, but even as she stood next to it to warm herself, she trembled. Harry came over and put his arm about her shoulder.

"We just have to try again, that's all. I'll look once more at the riddle. Maybe we missed something."

"Maybe," she whispered, staring into the flames. Harry holding her, she gazed into the fire for quite sometime. Eventually, the trembling stopped, and the fear holding her eyes captive vanished. She turned placing her hand to his face. "Harry... I-I need... I..." There was a rap at the door, and the two turned. A charm was cast and the door unlocked. Tonks began to reach for her wand just as Hermione entered.

"Harry. Tonks," she said smiling. "I thought the room was empty. Where's Gabriella, is she cooler now?" Tonks suddenly became nervous again and began scanning the room.

"I think she's upstairs," Harry said, clenching his teeth again and looking directly at Hermione with eyes that would burn. "Perhaps you should go check." Hermione didn't reply. Instead she nodded and turned to leave, but then stopped.

"Oh, Tonks," she said. "Hestia was looking for you... something about having to cover your watch at the Ministry. She didn't seem too happy." Hermione shrugged, and walked out the door. Stepping to the door herself, Tonks watched her leave then swung around to Harry. Again, Harry thought the movement odd.

"We'll talk about this again... back at school. We must. Maybe we just rushed things. I-I think we might have time... I hope," she whispered. "Just... just don't tell anybody, okay? They'll stop us for sure."

Harry nodded. "You're right. We'll take our time. If there's any chance at all, we need to do it right."

Tonks started walking toward the door then stopped looking about the room one last time. "Yes... at school," she said, heading out the door and toward the kitchen.

With the door open, Harry felt another cool breeze rush past him toward the fire. He turned expecting to see something or someone, but no one was there. A shiver ran down his spine, and he wasn't sure why. A moment later, Gabriella was out from under the cloak and at his side.

"What do you say we go home and you tell me what this is all about?" she suggested. "In case you didn't already notice, Hermione is clearly on to you."

Harry silently nodded, rolling his fingers into a fist.

"She's your friend, right?" she asked softly. "She's probably only worried about you."

"Worried about me?" Harry asked sharply. "Hermione likes things done... how can I put it... by the rules." He shook his head. "I don't think I'm playing by the rules right now. But then, it's not her godfather, is it?" This time Harry paused a moment and looked about the room. "Yeah, I'm ready to get out of here. If Ron wants to blow a gasket in his noggin, let him; and if Hermione sticks her nose in any further, I'll just have to nip it off, won't I?" He pushed the cloak into the sleeve of his jacket, took her by the hand, and quickly walked out of the study to use the floo. They skipped the kitchen, avoiding any pleasantries, but just as Harry reached for some powder, the front door opened. Remus Lupin stepped in wearing a toothy grin, followed by the same scowling and sullen Professor Snape.

"It's a miracle, I tell you Severus," Remus said, brushing a dusting of snow off his cloak. He looked for a hook to hang his cloak by, but finding them all full, opted to toss it onto the floor with the many others. "I've got to see Ron."

"Ah, yes," Professor Snape drawled. "Hogwarts has now replaced Saint Potter with Saint Weasley. Pathetic... truly pathetic." He too pulled off his cloak. Only, instead of dropping it to the floor he pulled his wand, cast a spell at the wall, and hung the garment there.

"You know that'll leave a mark, Severus," scolded Remus.

"I highly doubt that Sirius much cares at this point."

"It's Harry's home now, and you know that Molly will mind."

Professor Snape rolled his eyes, ignoring the correction in etiquette, and slipping his wand away. As Snape turned more fully into the light, Gabriella let out an almost imperceptible gasp.

"I know him," she whispered from behind. "Severus Snape. He came to visit Papa, about a month ago." She took a step backward behind Harry shielding her face behind his hair now hanging wildly about his neck. The move was not like her, and it was as if a switch had been flipped inside Harry. He suddenly disliked Professor Snape much less than normal, and that was saying a lot. Harry's right arm began to burn, and the powder in his hand slipped through his fingers, scattering to the floor. The two moved away from the fireplace and next to the column by the staircase.

"I don't understand," Harry whispered back, as Lupin and Snape continued to argue near entrance. "I thought you severed all ties with..."

"I thought so too," she said. "And look at me, here with all of you. If Severus sees me, Papa will know that..."

"He won't see you." Harry reached in to grab his cloak, but as he did so his elbow hit a candle stand and both Lupin and Snape looked over toward the noise. Swift as a cat, Gabriella swung behind the

column. Seeing only Harry but maybe more, Professor Snape's eyes narrowed.

"Potter," Snape sneered. "What a shame to find you here. But then, I should have expected such. You have no real home, do you?" Holding Snape's eyes with contempt in his own, Harry moved away from the staircase and toward the front door. As hoped, the professor kept eye contact and turned with his back to Gabriella. "Still playing the orphaned, unloved, foster child to the Weasley's." More flame began to pour into Harry's veins.

"Severus, really," Remus scolded. "Leave the boy..."

"What's it like not being the center of attention, Potter?" pressed Professor Snape, turning his lips up in something of a smile as he stepped closer to Harry. "Are you finally fading into the shadows where you've always belonged?" Harry's eyes were raging, and Professor Snape enjoyed the sight he'd missed for so long. He didn't know why, but he was getting to Harry at last. "No. I think not. You'll try some new fool stunt and get someone else killed again."

"Severus!" Remus yelled.

Harry was going to reach for his wand when the choking started in his throat, like a fur-ball needing to be dislodged. When he spat it out, all that emerged was a quavering whistle. Snape began to cackle. Harry had never heard him laugh before, and the sound was revolting. Still whistling, Harry reached for his wand, pointing it at Snape's two beady eyes, and in an instant the cackle stopped. Snape, still smirking, slowly pointed his own wand back. Harry continued to whistle, his eyes filled with hatred toward the Professor.

"Please, Potter," he spat. "Make this easy. Or, has the cat got your tongue?"

Angered, Gabriella stepped out, tall and defiant, from behind the column. When Snape saw her, his face contorted with a look of bewilderment and shock. She charged, and Snape cast the first spell at her. Harry didn't say it, he couldn't, but his thoughts were focused and even while he whistled a shield charm burst from his wand and

deflected the spell meant for Gabriella. It hit the wall under the staircase, and sprayed wood shards everywhere. Snape gaped in astonishment.

Remus pulled his own wand unsure where to point, but it didn't matter. On instinct, Snape spun and expelled it. Harry wanted to fire at Snape, but Gabriella was too close, and closing in. Snape's reflex to expel Remus' wand, though quick was not quick enough. The distraction gave her but a split second. She needed only half that time. Her foot struck Snape's forearm, and a loud crack reverberated about the entryway. His wand fell, clattering to the floor. With a sweep of her other leg, Snape lost his footing and was splayed out on his back. In a flash, she was on top of him holding his neck with her left hand, her right ready to strike.

"How do you know my father?" she commanded. She leaned her knee into his broken arm twisted on the floor. Snape winced in pain.

The kitchen was emptying and all stopped, stunned by the sight. Wands were quickly drawn just as Harry stepped between the members of the Order, and Gabriella towering above her prey. His arm ached, the pain beading perspiration on his forehead.

"Put the wand down and step aside, Potter!" Mad-Eye yelled.

"Don't make another move, Professor," Harry said stiffly. "This is my home, and some of the guests have been behaving badly."

Mad-Eye ignored his words and stepped forward reaching for his wand. Harry responded instantly. A tremendous flash of light erupted, not at the group in front of him, but at the ceiling above. The second floor came crashing down sending the members of the Order running for cover, and burying some under the rubble.

"You know my father," Gabriella yelled at Snape. "How is that?" Again she leaned on Snape's broken arm, only this time her hand twisted the side of his neck making his legs shake violently. Clenching his teeth, almost smiling, he remained defiantly silent.

"Immobulus!"

Harry spun to find Remus holding his wand. On the floor lay Professor Snape, stiff as a board.

"Murus!" Remus yelled. A shimmering wall appeared between the members of the Order and the four now in the entryway. Remus walked over to Professor Snape as Gabriella stood and slowly backed away. He looked down at the victim on the floor. "You'd kill her if you had the chance, wouldn't you Severus?" He reached down and pulled a small dagger out of Snape's good hand. He held it up to his face, examining the silver blade. "Not very sporting of you." Remus turned toward Harry and Gabriella. Harry half-heartedly held his wand up at Remus, just as Gabriella took his side. Remus simply sighed. He wanted to say something. Harry could see it in his eyes... something important... something wise. "Go home you two," was all he could muster.

"But..." Harry halted pointing to the ceiling.

"I don't know, Harry. Just go home, and stay there. We'll figure the rest out later."

"But this man..." said Gabriella fiercely, "he's been in my home. He knows my father! And now he pulls his wand on Harry. Who is he?"

"This man is Professor Severus Snape, and one of the finest wizards at Hogwarts," Remus said quite sincerely. "Your father is a Professor as well, is he not?" Gabriella reticently nodded, still having difficulty placing Snape in both worlds. "It does not seem so strange to me. But... if he should come to visit your father again, and I were you, I might stay locked in my room until he leaves. Now go!" Remus flicked his wand and it popped with a loud snap, making them jump. He didn't need to ask again.

When they emerged into number four, Privet Drive, Gabriella was both confused and furious. Harry, however, was laughing. Not from joy or mirth, but in a sort of nervous release of unspent energy that found no other way to express itself. He felt like rolling on the floor, but it was too disgusting.

"What are you laughing about?" Gabriella yelled.

"That's it," said Harry slapping his hands together. "I'm out. Not only did I use magic out of school, I used it to attack the Order." He laughed again, and pulled her close. "I'm practically a Muggle already. I can feel it!" He kissed her briskly on the lips and walked into the kitchen. "That is, if they don't send me to Azkaban." He opened a cupboard and pulled down two glasses. "I wonder if Duncan will give me my old job back. The kid he's got working at the shop now is a right git." He filled the glasses with ice then grabbed a chair and slid it next to the icebox. Stepping up and reaching into the back corner of the cupboard above the icebox, he pulled out a bottle of whiskey. "Vernon's private stash," he smirked, raising his eyebrows up and down. "Join me?"

"Harry, put that away," she scolded, but he didn't listen, and filled both glasses.

He held one up examining the golden liquid. The reflection in the glass seemed to glint two dots of red, and whatever smile Harry was trying to push forward faded away. He wished it could all be over, but wishing didn't make it so. Was the Dark Lord dead? Had Harry killed him at last? No. He was alive. Weak, but alive. Somehow, inside, Harry knew. He also knew one thing more--Gabriella's father was a dark wizard. There was no other explanation for Snape's meeting with him. He could feel the walls closing in around him.

"They'll take my wand away," he whispered, and then tossed the contents of the glass down his throat. "Maybe worse," he rasped. He began to pour again, but Gabriella took his hand.

"Don't be silly," she smiled sadly. "Like Atlas, you've been dealt a cruel trick and the weight of the world now rests on your shoulders. If something happens to you, we would all fall into oblivion." She put her arms about him. "Tell me, Harry, how is it that Asha should bring us together? My Titan. My love." She pulled him close.

There was cheering and the popping of crackers outside in the street, as revelers made their way back to their homes. Where was Harry's home? He had always thought Hogwarts, and had once hoped with

Sirius perhaps at Grimmauld Place, but both possibilities would soon be taken away. Home would be here. Holding her in his arms, he looked at the disastrous living room, and then considered the burnt out shell of a room upstairs. He would definitely have to start cleaning tomorrow. But tonight... tonight he was sure that Dudley wouldn't mind lending Harry his room. It was a new year, after all, what could possibly happen?

Chapter 54 - Pure Water

There was a loud crash.

Suddenly awake, Harry instinctively reached for his wand at the bedside table. Only, he couldn't move. He tried again, and still his body refused to respond.

A clatter and another crash.

He could feel the sheets about his body, his hands under the pillow beneath his face, but he couldn't see. His eyes were closed, and they would not open. "Gabriella!" he tried to cry out, but no sound came. He was immobilized, but he knew the feeling of an immobilus hex, and this was not it. A car passed by on Privet Drive.

"That's familiar," he thought. "I'm still in the house." Breathing in, he detected a hint of Gabriella's perfume. "Oh, no, please, no."

More clattering to either side. Something, inhuman, was moving about the bed in the Dursley's master bedroom. The bed jerked violently and there was another crash.

"Be careful! But, be swift. We must not tarry. We must meet the rising star." The voice was deep and stern.

"If the others learn of our actions..." This voice was softer, and anxious.

"They will learn soon enough." His words were heavy, filled with a familiar sorrow.

More distant steps and the sound of a door swinging open.

"Is it done?" asked the deep voice.

"She is finished," said a harsh male voice, also filled with sadness.

Harry could feel himself scream. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He could feel the perspiration build about his face, but still he could not move.

"He is awake," said the nervous one.

"Then it is time," said the leader, as if regretting his words.

More clatter, the sound of glass shattering, and a sudden sense of weightlessness. He felt as if he were floating above his bed. A burning red flash filled his gaze, and then all went black again. It was cold, very cold. He would be shivering if his body were able. The feeling of the sheet and pillow had disappeared. He felt nothing, but cold. The sounds, too, had changed. There was a stillness in the air. The clattering stopped, replaced with a swooshing sound--footsteps in snow.

"Cover him," commanded the deep voice. A moment later, Harry felt warmth as something was placed around him, and tied about his neck and waist.

"It's not too late," pleaded the nervous voice. "We can still..."

"Before you were born, your fate was sealed to this night... this new year... this rebirth."

"I only wish I could see the stars."

"They would only reveal the same truths we've spoken of..."

They were moving. He felt as if he was floating just in front of the others. Then a scent filled his nostrils. Pine. Wet. Decay. They were in a forest... the Forbidden Forest, he was sure of it. The occasional call of a bird, or scamper of a creature was all he heard.

"... he will die this day, as we have known all along."

There was a general snort from the other two, and then silence. No one spoke as they continued to make their way into the forest. The smell of death grew stronger, and a sense of foreboding swelled in

Harry's heart. They continued for what seemed like an hour, when finally the youngest broke the silence.

"You have always had the keenest eyes." There was no response. "And only you have seen its return." It was clear he was uncomfortable with what they were about to do.

"Tell him to stop!" Harry yelled in his head.

"There is another that has marked its return... at the school. A year hence it will burn as a second sun, and shimmer as a second moon, never dimmed by darkness. Would you have me close my eyes?" The words were scolding.

"But the school's wizard... surely he will seek retribution."

"It is not our fate to concern ourselves with the whims of wizards. Tonight, above the clouds, Mars burns bright, but Ebyrth returns. I will not set myself against the heavens."

Harry began to notice a hint of daylight filtering through his closed lids. The three stopped, and that's when he noticed it... the sound of birds chirping had disappeared... replaced by the sound of water. It was a small trickling at first. The air was much fresher here, as the odor of decay vanished. He focused his mind, concentrating to move himself, but his bones were held motionless. He had never known an immobilus hex to last this long. Again he cried out, but there was only silence.

"He grows restless," said the anxious voice, still tight with anticipation.

"It will be over soon," answered the dispassionate, deep voice.

They continued to move, following the babbling water. As they pressed on, the small stream was met by another, and then another. Eventually, the babble grew into a roar. Harry could feel a gentle breeze against his face that was still cold, but inside, for some reason, he felt warm. Fear, however, was creeping into his heart. He began to imagine Death Eaters, dark goblins, giants. He could hear the crashing of the water move to directly below him. In his mind's eye,

he could see where he was, he had been levitated out over the falls. He'd been here before on his Caduceus, only now he had no broom to support his weight.

"Remove the cloak," the leader called out over the roar of the falling water. Instantly, the mist and spray blasted Harry's entire body. He expected cold, but what he felt was pain. A thousand tiny needles plunged inward through his flesh. He tried to cry out, but made no sound.

"Wait! We can't..."

"Goodbye... Harry Potter. Until we meet again."

The spell holding him skyward was released, and with it the spell holding him motionless. Flailing his arms, he began to plummet down, spray splashing against his naked body. With each wave of water washing up against his body, he felt a deeper sensation of pain. As he tumbled, he tried to see who had thrown him to his death, but everything was a blur; his glasses were still on the table by the bed on Privet Drive. Three figures, one reminiscent of a Weasley, pulled back from the brink and disappeared from view. The water, the rocks, all rose up to greet him. Had it been Voldemort? Was this the end? He closed his eyes, and in that instant, just before his death, he remembered. Instead of clenching in fear, his eyes opened fully to freely meet their fate. He splashed into the pool, just missing jagged edges of stone to either side. His body was on fire, and he heard them call as he continued to sink.

The voices, and there were many, came from everywhere. "Love harbors no enemies... be cleansed." A tremendous flash of light filled his field of vision, blinding him with its brightness. His lungs were screaming for air, but there was none to be had. In the fractured light, he thought he saw them coming to greet him, coming to take him away from this world.

Mother? Father?

His vision began to fail, tunneling to a single point of bright white, only to fade to darkness.

He gasped for air, and heaved great gulps of it into his lungs. His eyes sprang open, and he sat bolt upright, the sheet falling to his waist. This was wrong... he was in his uncle and aunt's room, the only room in the Dursley's house that hadn't been damaged. There was a large banging sound downstairs and Harry again reached for his wand at the tableside, but all he found was a book on how to sell drills. He was feeling disoriented, his whole body ached, and the fact that everything was blurred didn't help. Someone was coming up the stairs, and Harry stood, his long hair falling down about his face. Still confused, he suddenly realized he was naked. Quickly, he wrapped himself in the sheet, grabbed the largest weapon he could find, the book, and stepped behind the door. The door swung open, hitting Harry hard in shoulder. He reached up to swing down, when the person grabbed his hand.

"Harry?" he asked. "What the... What are you doin' in dad's room dressed like a Greek? You have some sort of toga party last night?"

"Dudley?" Harry asked squinting his eyes.

Dudley tossed a suitcase down and slipped the boot out of Harry's hand, flinging it onto the bed.

"Two weeks alone, and you get a bit jumpy, eh?" He looked over at the bed. "I don't recall them saying you could sleep here."

"Well... er..." Harry stammered. "In my room, there was a bit of a fire see, and..."

"Fire?" Dudley exclaimed excitedly, quickly dashing across the hall, and bursting into Harry's room.

"Wait!" yelled Harry, chasing after him. "I..."

He nearly tripped over Dudley standing in the doorway to his room.

"What fire?" challenged Dudley.

The room was, well, perfect. The carpet looked as it always had. Even the stains beneath the unbroken window were the same. Hedwig's cage had fresh paper. It was as if nothing had happened. The only unusual thing about his room was that it was clean, and his bed made. His glasses were at his bedside, but his wand was nowhere to be found. He put his glasses on, pulling Dudley's sheet tighter about him.

"Glass..." Harry whispered, ignoring Dudley's question, "I know I heard shattered glass." Harry dashed into Dudley's room. It too looked untouched. He was certain he'd heard the lamp from the dresser crash to the floor, but there was absolutely nothing wrong. He heard the heavy footsteps of Vernon climbing the stairs. Holding two suitcases, he met Harry at the top, and his face was furious. He dropped them both, and was pointing back down the stairs but was too winded to say anything. And then Harry remembered the disaster downstairs.

"I-I'm sorry," Harry said, apologizing for what he'd done to the living room. "I just haven't had a chance..."

"Sorry?" Vernon screamed. "We trusted you! Get out of my sight!" He grabbed the suitcases and trudged into his room.

"You forgot to put the liquor bottle back in the cupboard," Dudley whispered in his ear. "Mum found it in the icebox." Dudley patted Harry on the shoulder. "You know, he keeps a case in the garage. I always swap 'em out and he never notices."

Harry hurried down the stairs and Dudley followed. Petunia was putting a few bags worth of groceries away. She scowled silently at Harry as he made his way to the living room. The fireplace was gone, covered by the same wall that was there before. The room was spotless, except for the jacket Gabriella had given him, which now hung over the back of one of the chairs.

"I will not have a drunk that is incapable of picking up after himself under my roof!" Aunt Petunia called from the kitchen. "Take your coat to your room!"

"I guess," smirked Dudley under his breath, "that means you can drink all you want... as long as you're neat." He smiled, kicked off his shoes, and flipped on the television. Befuddled, Harry grabbed his jacket and made his way back up the stairs. Was it all a dream? He had to get dressed, and see if Gabriella was okay.

His head still ached as he returned to his room. Unsure of anything, he began to question everything that happened since he left Hogwarts. He was putting on his clothes, trying to remember his dream from the night before, it had seemed so real, when the doorbell rang; it was Gabriella. Harry's heart leapt as he heard her voice from downstairs. She was in an animated conversation with Dudley when Harry heard her say, "What do you mean he's here?"

"Wait! You can't..." Dudley called, but too late. She was charging up the stairs.

Harry met her outside his door and she nearly tackled him full force driving him back into his room. "Harry! You're okay!" She held him tight, kissing his neck. "Where have you been? I thought they... I thought they... Asha, Harry, it's been days."

"Days?" Harry asked confused. "What do you mean? What day is it?"

"Saturday," she answered, pushing back the wisps of hair hanging in Harry's face.

"The fourth!" he exclaimed. "That's not possible. I was only..." Seeing her expression he stopped. Her eyes had drifted upward from his. He was used to this look from most people, but not Gabriella. She wasn't listening, and that irritated him. "Yeah, it's my scar. Now would you look at me?" he said, pointing at his own eyes with two fingers.

Gabriella slowly shook her head, and then took her own hand rubbing her thumb against his scar. "It... it's gone," she whispered.

"What?" Harry asked. He stood and walked over to the dresser, then lifted back his hair to see the scar on his forehead. Where once was what could be described as a single bolt of lightning, was a normal everyday forehead, free of any mark at all. Seeing that the mark had

vanished, his eyes drift down to his arm. Though his arm did not ache, the scar was there, but not as he had seen it before. The mark of the sword and the snake was neither red, nor swollen, but a clear white outline traced its structure. He let his hair drop down about his face.

"No," Harry muttered, slumping his shoulders. He placed both hands on his dresser trying to think. "What's going on? What's happening to me?"

"Your safe," she answered. "That's the important thing. But, we need to talk. There are..."

Uncle Vernon burst into the room. "Is this what you've been doing while we've been gone?" he spat, grabbing Gabriella by the arm. She could have easily snapped his, but made no such move. "You know... NO VISITORS!" He began to drag Gabriella out of the room. "You'll have to leave."

Harry on the contrary was furious. "Stop it!" Vernon ignored him, roughly escorting Gabriella to the stairs. Knowing he had no wand, Harry held up his hand, "Expelliarmus!" he yelled. Nothing happened. He looked at the palm of his right hand as if trying to see why it had misfired then raised it again. "Stupefy!" he called, and still nothing happened.

Vernon and Gabriella were halfway down the stairs, with Harry only a step behind, when there was a loud pop from below, then a snap. Aunt Petunia let out a small shriek. There was another pop from above. Wizards, dressed in Ministry robes, were apparating all over the Dursley home. It sounded like a fresh string of firecrackers had just been lit off. In an instant, over a dozen Ministry witches and wizards surrounded them. Uncle Vernon stopped, petrified by the incursion. He let go of Gabriella, but she too remained frozen. Among the dozens of wizards brandishing wands, there were none that Harry recognized, save one, Arthur Weasley. He was nervous, tense, and the lines on his face were deeper than ever.

"Thank God," Mr. Weasley breathed in a great sigh as he stepped to the bottom of the stairs. "Mr. Dursley," he nodded politely. "Sorry for the...er... intrusion, but Harry's been missing, and I just received

word he'd arrived." He looked up at Gabriella nodding his head in greeting, and then turned to Harry. "I'm glad you decided to return. No worse for the wear I hope." He tried to muster a smile, but Harry could see at once it was forced. Many of those in Ministry robes began to scuttle about looking for something, or someone.

A wizard on the second floor appeared from inside Harry's room. "Clear, Minister," he said in a steely voice. Mr. Weasley nodded, then looked at another wizard at his side.

"Nothing down here, sir," the wizard said quietly. Again, Mr. Weasley nodded.

"See here," said Uncle Vernon, mustering a moment of courage. "This is my home! I'll not have it crawling with the likes of... of you!"

"I completely understand, sir," answered Mr. Weasley in a kind, albeit controlled, voice. "This," he held out his arms and pointed at the wizards searching the house, "was simply a precaution." He gave the signal and the room exploded with a sudden crackling, then fell quite. All the wizards had apparated except for the one that spoke on the top of the stairs, and the one on the bottom now at Mr. Weasley's side. "We needed to be sure that Harry hadn't run off, and gotten himself into trouble."

"Oh, the boy's good for that," sneered Uncle Vernon, stepping down to the lower floor followed by Gabriella. Harry began to step down himself.

"Mr. Weasley," Harry said, "I don't know what you're thinking, but I didn't run off anywhere."

"Yes... well," Mr. Weasley stammered, not looking Harry directly in the eyes. "Be that as it may, I... er... May I have your wand?" He held out his hand, looking somewhere below Harry's neck.

"My what?" Harry howled, taking a step backward up the stairs. He looked up the staircase at the wizard now blocking his way. "It's because of what happened at Grimmauld Place, isn't it?" There was no answer. "My safety?" Harry yelled. "My bloody well being, is that

it?" He took another step back. "Tell me, Mr. Weasley. Have you taken over the Ministry, or has the Ministry taken over you?"

"This is nonsense, Harry," Mr. Weasley pleaded. "I assure you it's only temporary. Just hand it to me."

Aunt Petunia stepped from the kitchen into view. She was enjoying this. There was a smirk on her face, and her eyes were narrowed in anticipation of what was to come. Harry despised that look, but he turned his anger on Mr. Weasley.

"How is it that a dozen Hogwarts students can serve Voldemort and his Death Eaters with their wands, and you come after me?"

"Strictly speaking... they were on school grounds, although..."

"That's absurd!" Harry spat. "You want my wand?" he yelled looking at the three wizards surrounding him. "You want my wand? I'll give you my wand!" He reached toward his back pocket, and remembered too late he had no wand. A stunner hit him squarely in the back. His last thought... "Ooops." And he crumpled into darkness.

A few moments later, Harry began to come to his senses on the couch in the Dursley living room. Gabriella had her hands to his head, and when she whispered something he didn't hear the fog immediately lifted from his mind. He moved to sit up, but she held him down, which was just as well. His back ached. The stunner packed a bit more wallop than the one Draco had hit him with earlier in the year.

Mr. Weasley sat alone on the coffee table holding his hand together and tapping his index fingers together. He was nervous, and aside from Gabriella, they were alone. The Dursley's had retreated to the second floor, and the other Ministry wizards had disappeared.

"He can speak," Gabriella said softly, "but I'll need to work on his back later."

"I understand, Gabriella," said Mr. Weasley. She stood and walked over to the window as Mr. Weasley leaned in. "Are you bloody daft,

boy?" he asked Harry sharply. "Why didn't you just tell me you didn't have a wand?"

Harry took a deep breath, and slowly released it, but the anger that was with him before he was taken down still ebbed in his veins. "You thought I ran, didn't you?" he replied. "Harry Potter Caught Fleeing Ministry Justice... I can see the Daily Prophet now. Am I to go to trial again, then? Or is it just off to Azkaban?"

"Harry, you're being..."

"Have you searched my room? My pockets? The house? What about my mind?" Harry forced himself up, grimacing, and opened his eyes wide in front of Mr. Weasley's face in a mocking gesture. "Nope, nothing in there." He deliberately let his hair fall down his face to hide the change in his scar. "I'm sure Ron can confirm that."

Mr. Weasley simply closed his eyes, and dropped his head. He rubbed his face with his hands trying to bring some bit of life back to his spirit, but none came. He stood and joined Gabriella at the window. "I thought..." he started, but then stopped. He walked over to the wall that once again was hiding the fireplace on the other side. "Nice work," he said to Gabriella. "You're sure you won't reconsider? Certainly after the hearing, it would be possible with the right recommendation."

"No, sir," Gabriella answered with a pleasant smile. "At least... not yet. There are still some things I need to discuss with my parents. Perhaps as Mama recovers..." Mr. Weasley broke out in his first smile.

"That's the closest you've come to saying yes! I'll take it, and I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will too."

"So I'm to have a hearing then?" Harry asked, not fully comprehending the conversation he'd just heard.

"No, Harry," Mr. Weasley responded somewhat irritated. "It's been ruled that you cast your spell in protection of another, and, since it

was on your own premises, your efforts at... redecorating warranted a three-day wand suspension. I didn't think you'd take it so badly."

"But all the wizards... I thought..."

"I'm sorry I frightened you with so many Ministry members, but frankly, I was worried. We lost you for a while and no one knew where you were. Then suddenly, plop, we could sense you again." He found one of the game controls to Dudley's games, and his eyes lit for a moment, but then fell. "And, yes, I did think you ran. Only because you've done so in the past," he quickly added. He came over and sat back down at Harry's side. "You should know by now you can't run from family. You should ask Percy," he said with the first real smile he'd muster since he arrived, and this time there was a warmth in Mr. Weasley's eyes that Harry could not resist.

"I didn't run. It's just... well, things happened so suddenly. I was gone, then back, and then there were the Dursleys, and the house was back to normal, and then you and the others. My mind's not on straight," Harry shrugged, rubbing his temples. "I'm sorry."

"Gone where, Harry?"

"If I told you hell and back, would you believe me?"

"Very well," sighed Mr. Weasley with disappointment in his breath. "Perhaps you'll explain it to Professor Dumbledore upon your return to Hogwarts." Mr. Weasley stood and positioned himself to disapparate. "Oh, and considering recent events, you may notice a few new neighbors about the street. They'll be gathering first thing in the morning to take you to the train. Gabriella, I'll see you Thursday, and as for you Harry, I'd like you to have this." He handed Harry a scroll. "Take care, both of you." With a snap he was gone. An instant later Uncle Vernon was strolling down the stairs.

"What?" he sputtered. "You're not off to jail?"

Harry had neither the energy, nor the inclination to argue. Something was to happen to Gabriella, and he needed to find out what, but not

here. Cringing again, he stood, holding the scroll in his hand, and walked silently with Gabriella to the door.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Vernon howled.

Harry simply looked back at him over his shoulder with a scowl. With one hand he slipped back his hair behind his ear revealing a dangling caduceus and his unblemished forehead. Vernon’s eyes blinked with confusion as Harry opened the door, and stepped out. He was about to cross the street, when he thought of the Heart. “The stone!” Harry cried out. He turned to return to the house, when she grabbed his arm.

“I have it,” she said reassuringly. “Come. I need to have a look at your back, and then we can talk.”

When they entered her home, Grigor was, as always, absent. Soseh, however, was reading a magazine on the couch and greeted him warmly. “We missed you these last few days, Harry,” she said with a gentle smile. “Have you not been feeling well? Gabriella wouldn’t say.”

“I’m going to have a look at him, Mama,” Gabriella answered. “I think something to calm his nerves might be in order.”

“Certainly, dear,” said Soseh, standing and walking toward the kitchen. “Give me ten minutes.”

Harry and Gabriella climbed the stairs and entered into Gabriella’s room, this time leaving the door open. Her cat was sleeping in the corner under a beam of sunlight that peeked through the window. When she saw Harry, she took to her feet and began to wind her way back and forth about his ankles.

“She belonged to my brother,” Gabriella said sadly. She had Harry take off his shirt and lay down on her bed, when she pulled a wand from inside her sleeve. It was ash, about nine inches long, and had tiny engravings along its shaft, symbols that Harry didn’t recognize.

“Whoa... what’s that?” asked Harry, surprised.

"They really don't teach you much at that school of yours, do they?" she answered with a smug tone. Harry began to recoil a bit.

"Well, I mean, I know what it is, but I thought..."

"Lay down," she chided, pushing him back on his stomach. A blue light bathed his back, and there was instant relief. A touch rivaling Madame Pomfrey's, Harry thought. He unrolled his scroll.

"I don't believe it," he whispered.

"What is it," she asked, "papers for my trial?"

"It's... it's a permission slip to leave Hogwarts on weekends, signed Arthur Weasley, Acting Minister of Magic." A pang of guilt twanged the inside of Harry's heart. He rolled the scroll and dropped his head on the pillow, letting Gabriella's wand wash the pain away. For a moment, Harry was lost in comfort. It was Gabriella who broke the silence.

"I've been a fool. Darkness covers the land, and I thought I could hide from it... pretend it didn't exist. If I would have had this with me, they wouldn't have taken you," she said solemnly, as waves of relief splashed against Harry's back. "They had the advantage of surprise, and I was bound, silenced, and tossed into the living room. It was over in a flash, but if I'd have had my wand, they would have never had the chance."

"Who? Who bound you?"

"Filthy beasts," she spat, reliving the memory. "You were right, Harry. It's too dangerous to be without a wand. I was an idiot for pretending I could be something I'm not."

Harry rolled over on his back to find Gabriella's eyes fixed in space. Her hand clenched her wand so tight that her knuckles were turning white. There was a tremor in her hand, and when Harry reached out to touch it Gabriella flinched.

"It's okay," he whispered. "I'm fine, really." She looked into his eyes, tears welling in her own, and hugged him tight.

"I thought the Dark Lord had sent them," she said breathlessly. "I thought they had taken you to him. I thought... I thought..." she squeezed tighter.

"Who, Gabriella?" he pleaded. "What beasts?" She pulled back, and wiped the tears from her face with her arm. Her eyes turned to steel, filling with a hate Harry had never seen fully before. Finally, she let him know with a voice that chilled him to the bone.

"Centaurs."

"Centaurs?"

"They should have all been destroyed after the last war! Where did they take you? How did you escape?"

"Escape? You have it wrong, Gabriella, at least I think you do. I... I didn't need to escape; they set me free."

Chapter 55 - The Wizard Next Door

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It wasn't long before Harry finished telling the tale of his trip into the heart of the Forbidden Forest. The door to Gabriella's room open, he slipped his shirt on, and leaned back on her bed against the pillows. His spine felt much better, but his mind still seemed muddled. How he had missed the last few days was beyond him. Outside, the sun was bright and the afternoon wearing on. He hadn't eaten, but he wasn't hungry. He was trying as best he could to remember every detail. The only thing of which he was certain was his being bound and taken to the falls by Centaurs. Although even after Gabriella's story he still wasn't convinced that it was only Centaurs. Harry explained how at first he thought his captors might have been in league with Voldemort. He shuddered as he recalled his thoughts that they might have first killed her, and he was stoic when he spoke of how he thought they were going to kill him.

"And then they did," he said with a quite voice.

"Did what?" Gabriella asked confused.

"I don't know," said Harry shaking his head, confused himself. He knew what it felt like to die, at least almost. And yet, at the falls his spirit never left his body, but somehow he knew that some part of him had died. Some part of Harry Potter was gone, and he didn't know what it was.

"Do you remember them doing this?" she asked, pushing away the hair from his forehead, and rubbing it with her thumb. He shook his head no. He paused for a moment and then decided it was time to show her.

"You haven't seen this," he said, pulling back the sleeve on his right arm to reveal the mark. Gabriella gave a small gasp, but more of surprise than fear. She did not know the mark of the Death Eaters, as so many wizards in Britain did. Harry's eyes were fixed on Gabriella's hoping beyond hope he could find a way to tell her his thoughts about her father.

"This is what you wrote me about," she said excitedly, "after the accident." He felt her touch run up his arm. "But I've seen your bare arm, Harry. This is new."

"No. It used to fade, and disappear. Now, it's just... there, while my forehead has no..."

"And this? You never mentioned this." She tapped his arm. "I don't remember you writing about a vine."

"Vine?" he asked, looking down. Springing forth from his wrist, at the tip of the sword, was the image of a vine that weaved its way halfway up the sword on his arm. It wasn't there earlier in the morning, he was sure.

"What the..."

"It's a blessing."

Gabriella and Harry turned to see Soseh standing at the door. In her hand was a steaming mug, and on her face was a smile. Her eyes seemed clearer than Harry had seen since he arrived, though her hair had a few more flecks of gray. She walked in, and handed the mug to Harry. "Drink this, and you're aches will fade away as well. She held the back of her hand to his head as if checking for a fever. "Tell me Harry. How did you release your burden?"

"My burden?"

Soseh's knowing smile widened. "Drink. I've started a little something to eat. Healing the soul is always best done on a full stomach. Come." She held her hand out, and Harry took it in his own and stood. Before moving, she gave him a look that said drink, and he did. They made their way to the kitchen and the familiar smells of food and warmth filled him, and for the first time his stomach growled. Even Gabriella heard and smiled.

"Will Mr. Darbinyan be joining us?" he asked cautiously. He hadn't had the chance to ask if Gabriella had mentioned her meeting Snape,

and wondered if she might be hiding her meeting with the Ministry later in the week. His question only received a slight shrug from both Gabriella and Soseh.

“Papa, has taken to speaking in riddles. He certainly won’t answer my questions with straight answers. Who knows where he is or when he’ll be back.”

Seeing that he had spoiled the mood, Harry turned to talking about traveling to Lebanon over the summer vacation. Much like the drink in his mug, it was the perfect medicine, and before long plans were being made and stories told. They had finished their meal, and Soseh poured him a small cup of coffee, handing it to Gabriella who handed it to Harry without sugar. He sipped, praising Soseh for the meal.

“You two should enjoy your last day!” said Soseh, clapping her hands. “The sun is bright and the sky blue, but I wonder which shines brighter?” Her eyes narrowed on Harry, but her face still bore a mischievous grin. “You have used your birthday gift, no?”

Harry cast Gabriella a glance, and then looked Soseh in the eyes and nodded. She took his hand and unfolded his palm looking at it closely. That’s when she noticed the tip of the sword peeking out from under his sleeve. Without asking she pushed back the sleeve, and Harry didn’t stop her. But in an instant, her smile washed into a look of bewilderment. “Yes... of course,” she muttered, sitting back into her chair. The look of clarity that was there only moments earlier faded, and lines of concern appeared on her face. “Go... enjoy the day. I must do the dishes.” She stood up and walked over to the sink, and began washing the dishes by hand.

“I thought you had taken back your wands?” Harry whispered to Gabriella. The eyes of his girlfriend were sad, as she once again watched her mother slip away into another place.

“Mama, never had a wand,” she said with a reminiscent melancholy to her words. “She never needed one.” She stood motioning for Harry to follow her. “I don’t think Papa ever put his down. It’s been a lie, Harry. I think he’s been...”

The front door opened, and in walked Grigor. They both stood and looked at him like to children caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

"Hello princess," Grigor said with a smile, giving her a hug and kissing her cheek. "Harry." He tapped Harry on the shoulder, and took in a deep breath. "Ah, it smells wonderful!" Then he saw Soseh doing dishes, and his face fell. "But, I'm too late." He hung his jacket by the door and began to walk into the kitchen when Gabriella took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she was about to say.

"Papa!" she called. "Can I ask you something?" Grigor turned. His eyes were tired.

"I don't think I'm up to playing twenty questions again, dear."

"It's about Professor Snape."

Grigor looked at Harry as if he should go somewhere else, then looked at his daughter with a pound of frustration on his face. "I told you before, I met so many people when we first arrived, I don't recall who you're talking about."

Gabriella took another deep breath. "Professor Snape teaches at Hogwarts, Papa. He is one of Harry's professors." She swallowed.

Grigor glanced briefly at Harry, and then back to her. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been meaning to tell you... it's just that... Harry isn't in reform school, he attends Hogwarts."

Grigor smiled as if she were joking. "That's not possible, dear. You know that. And you should watch yourself. The penalties can be severe." He turned back to the kitchen. "Certainly there must be something to eat in the cupboard."

"His name is not Harry Dursley, Papa. It's Harry Potter."

Grigor froze.

“Harry Potter, Papa. It was you who told me the stories in school of the boy that lived. So my one question today is: did you know who he was when we moved in? Have you known all along? Is he the reason we’re here, Papa? And if he is, why?” Gabriella’s words grew more biting with each question.

Slowly Grigor turned. He did not believe at first, his eyes darting from Gabriella to Harry, and back again. He stepped closer to the pair, and finally his eyes came to rest on the hair hanging over Harry’s face. Forgetting it had vanished, Harry moved his bangs back to reveal the lightning bolt on his forehead.

Grigor looked at the empty forehead intently. Finally, his upper lip pulled up in a failed attempt to smile. “Is this some kind of joke?” he scoffed. It became immediately clear that Grigor had never known the boy across the street was a wizard, let alone Harry Potter. His face, his eyes, his mind were all trying to process what information he knew of his daughter’s boyfriend. The problem was, he never was home enough to learn about Harry or, for that matter, Gabriella’s feelings for him. He did know the look of his daughter’s eyes, however, and she was not joking. With or without a scar, the young man standing in front of him was indeed Harry Potter. He dropped his hand to his side in resignation.

“Of course,” Grigor whispered. But then a flash of concern came into his eyes. He quickly glanced at Soseh who was finishing in the kitchen. He clasped Harry’s shoulder. “You can’t be near my daughter,” he said sternly. “You’re... you’re too dangerous.”

“Papa!”

“This is not your concern, girl,” Grigor snapped. “There are things involved here that are beyond your comprehension.”

“Like Voldemort?” Harry asked coolly, narrowing his eyes.

Again, Grigor flashed a look to find Soseh drying her hands. “Come with me, boy.” He pulled on Harry’s shoulder, but Harry stood firm. He

had no intention of going into a room alone with a Death Eater. "I said..."

"Mr. Darbinyan, would you mind showing me your right forearm?" Harry asked. He expected to see fire in Grigor's eyes, but instead the Armenian laughed.

"You fear I am in his service?" Grigor asked. He yanked up his sleeve to reveal nothing more than bare skin. "There, Harry. Do you feel safe now?" There was an insincere mirth to the question. Harry looked at the hand on his shoulder, then back to Grigor, who finally let go. "Please, we must speak."

Harry held Gabriella's eyes for a moment, and then followed Grigor into the now familiar study. As Grigor closed the door behind him, his shoulders noticeably slumped. He looked exhausted as he held his hand out for Harry to sit, which Harry cautiously did. Here, now, without his wand, he felt more exposed than ever.

"A foreign wizard moves in across the street," Grigor chuckled to himself. "I can see why you would be concerned. I assure you, Harry, your Ministry is well aware of our presence. Although, I wish they would have told me about yours," said Grigor, sitting behind his desk with a sigh. He leaned forward placing both hands flat on his desk. "I came to this little village to protect my daughter from the darkness collapsing around us, and instead I've put her in the hands of the greatest danger in the world, save the Dark Lord himself."

"I'm no danger," retorted Harry in defense. "I'm only..." he stopped, and lowered his head. Of course, he was a danger. In just one week, Gabriella had been in more danger than nearly every witch at Hogwarts combined.

Grigor looked keenly at Harry's green eyes. "How could I have been so stupid?" he asked himself. "Harry Potter." He shook his head. "You wore a lightning bolt earring, no?"

"Gabriella gave it to me for my birthday."

"I might have known." He looked at the earring now on Harry's left ear. "But this... a caduceus?"

Listening to Grigor, Harry was beginning to wonder if he'd had it all wrong. "The name of my broom," he answered. Grigor's eyes widened slightly.

"You're a flyer?" he asked with a bit of interest. Harry nodded. "Excellent. I had hoped..." he stopped short and leaned back in his chair looking up at the ceiling. The silence stretched, and Harry felt he needed to ask.

"Gabriella says you gave it all up because of what happened to her brother."

Grigor drew a deep breath. "You complicate things, Harry. Damn you," he hissed. He took to his feet. "I told you to stay away from my daughter, knowing it would bring you closer." Hearing this, Harry sat higher in his chair. "Tell a teenager the sky is blue, they'll tell you it's green. Tell them you agree, they'll change their mind." He took one finger and spun a large globe of the world. "But I thought... I thought you were a Muggle." His voice was empty... hollow. "I'm sorry for this, Harry." With dazzling speed his wand was out and pointed directly at Harry's face.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Harry asked, unflinching and slowly standing to his feet. "You placed the protection spell on me."

Grigor was impressed at Harry's nerve, but he held his wand fast. "I can't remove it," he said weakly. "And I won't have you go mad around my daughter. I'm surprised that you're not already..."

"So this is yours?" Harry interrupted, holding out his own arm and revealing the sword and snake. "You did this to me?"

When Grigor saw the mark on Harry's arm his face pulled up in confusion. His wand, which was ready to kill Harry, now tilted slightly askew. Carefully, Harry took a step closer giving Grigor a better look.

"Soseh," Grigor whispered, dropping his wand to his side.

"Mrs. Darbinyan?" Harry breathed in, now that Grigor's wand was lowered.

"She can see what others can not. You would do well to never argue with my wife, Harry. She's always right." Grigor sat on a small wooden stool in the corner of the study. "She knew what I was about to do. She must have charmed you first, and that means our spells have been fighting each other." He searched Harry's face. "Your emotions, your magic, I'm sure they must seem out of control," he said with concern. "Give me your hand." Grigor held out his own to shake, and when Harry held out his, Grigor again grabbed at Harry's forearm.

The older wizard looked as if he were reaching into a dark box trying to find something that wasn't there. His face was perplexed when he finally let go. "There is nothing," he said, confused. "I almost killed you, for something that isn't there. I don't understand... the spell... both are spells are gone." There was a great sadness welling up in Grigor's eyes. The creases in his face seemed to deepen while he sat looking down at his own two hands as if they were strangers. "There was a time when all my work was turned to healing. What have I become? All because I thought you were a Muggle."

"Most the Muggles around here are fine people, sir. None are worth killing. You'd learn that if you spent the time..."

"Fine people?" Grigor spat. He stood, roughly rubbing his hands together. "If my son had been a wizard... he exclaimed, but what started strong, collapsed in on itself. "They killed everything that was my family, and even as we speak they go on killing, here and in Lebanon." He walked to the window to look out on the backyard.

Harry followed Grigor across the room. "The day will come," Harry said solemnly, "when the killing will stop for wizard and Muggle alike, even in Lebanon. But it has to start somewhere. Why not with us?" Grigor shook his head, and Harry placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sir, you need to speak with your daughter. She has something to share with you about Antreas." Grigor flinched hearing his son's name out loud. "There's also something from this morning that..."

"Not now," a weary Grigor answered, turning. "Now, I need to speak with my wife. If she is able. I owe her an apology greater than I am worth." He breathed in and gathered himself. "Hogwarts?" he asked. "It is a fine school. And, if I'm not mistaken, you'll be returning tomorrow. Best that you should spend some time with Gabriella to say goodbye." Grigor began to walk Harry to the door.

"Then it was just an accident, the Darbinyan's coming to Privet Drive?" asked Harry, skeptically.

"An accident?" Grigor asked out loud, almost as if examining the question himself. "No, Harry. Mrs. Darbinyan will tell you, nothing is ever an accident. I am chasing a spirit, that's all. Where that path leads, I've yet to learn." He opened the wood door and waited for Harry to step through. "You should look in on Duncan. I hear he was asking about you yesterday."

Grigor didn't follow as Harry walked out into the hall. Instead, he quietly closed the door behind him. Gabriella stood at the base of the stairs. She was trembling. "I-I forgot..." She held out her hand, presenting Harry with his wand. "If s-something would have happened..." Harry smiled, and took her in his arms.

"I'm fine," he said dismissively. "We just talked. Now he knows who I am, and that's important." He held her by the shoulders looking into her eyes. "I think you should let go of your secrets too, Gabriella. Tell your father about Antreas."

"I don't know, Harry. I... I guess it depends. Do you know? Could you tell?" she asked. "Is he... is he a..."

"He's your father," Harry cut in. "And he's also your mother's husband. He wants to be alone with her right now. We should go." They walked to the front door and passed Soseh, napping in the living room. She seemed so peaceful. A thin smile was on her face as she rested.

Gabriella put her arm in Harry's as they walked out into the late afternoon air. The sky was blue and the air warm. What snow Harry

remembered from days before had washed away with the rain. Arm in arm they elected to walk to Duncan's.

"You know... if the Ministry knew you hid this..."

"I didn't hide it," she cut in. "I just didn't offer it up. After all, nobody asked me."

"And Tuesday? What's that about?"

"I did break his arm," she said sheepishly. "They say I need to pay restitution, for time off work."

"But school's not even in session!" Harry howled. "And it probably took all of five minutes for them to heal his arm." He began to steam just thinking about it. "I want to be there."

"Don't be silly," she said, and that ended the conversation, although Harry was none too pleased about it.

When they arrived at Duncan's, they found Todd's car parked in front. Harry shook his head.

"Where are his parents?" he asked. "Don't they know what happened?" Gabriella stopped him on the walk outside.

"Papa wondered the same thing. He actually spoke with them the other night. They think it's all just Duncan's way of calling for help, and they don't want to reinforce that behavior by running home."

"That's ludicrous! Where are they?"

"The Caribbean," she sighed. "Martinique, I think." Harry's heart sank. He should have been here, not chasing a hopeless dream that he might get his godfather back. The pain here was real and now. Harry felt that Duncan might just as well be an orphan. Only, somehow this seemed worse.

"Three whole days," Harry whispered. "Where was I?" he asked to the air.

"You're here now," said Gabriella brightly. "Let's go in."

It was Duncan that answered the door. He was laughing at something over his shoulder as he swung the door open. "Gab! Harry! Come in! Come in! Where the hell have you been, mate?" He was in clean bright clothes. His hair had recently been trimmed, and it looked as if he'd just shaved. In fact, there was a scent of cologne about him. Harry just stood gawking. "What? You expected to see me ready to off myself again? Not this kid," he said with a smile. Harry still couldn't think what to say. The two stood and looked at each other. For some reason, the moment... the meeting was awkward. Finally, Duncan put his arm about Harry's shoulder, and they walked into the front room. "I'm glad you stopped by tonight. You're leaving for school tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah," Harry said weakly. "Tomorrow." Again there was an awkward silence.

"Where's Todd?" Gabriella asked trying to fill the void.

"Right here," came a voice from the top of the stairs. Todd stood in a robe, toweling his hair. "We're going to see a film tonight, would you care to join us?" Gabriella looked at Harry now seated in the front room. His eyes were fixed on a small spot on the carpet. It was the first he'd been back since the night Duncan attempted suicide.

"Harry," she said, "what do you think?" Instead of answering Gabriella, Harry turned to Duncan.

"Dunc, I'm sorry. I should have stopped you before you ever had the chance."

"Your sorry?" huffed Duncan with a smile. "Christ, mate. If it weren't for you..."

"Okay, that's it," called Todd. "All this sorry-sorry stuff has helped me decide. Forget Braveheart, we're going to see Babe."

"Oh, that pig is so cute," Gabriella smiled.

Duncan's smile broadened. "They say the animals look like they're really talking," he added. "Can you imagine? Like they live in their own separate world, and nobody knows."

"Crazy," said Harry, casting a furtive glance at Gabriella. "Imagine."

"Then it's decided!" Todd said brightly. "I'll be down in a flash. We can take my car."

By the end of the night, not only had they seen the film, but they had met a number of other kids out for fun on their last night of winter freedom. Before long they and others they met had migrated to, and mixed with, a large crowd at Clancy's Pub. They danced, threw darts, covertly sipped a few beers, and had a grand time. Harry was wearing a wide grin after watching Duncan completely miss the dartboard when Gabriella came over to him.

"You're happy for a change," she said, trying to smile herself, but not making a very good go of it. They both leaned against the wall to watch the crowd, and she took Harry by the hand. "I think Duncan is too."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I'm glad he's got friends willing to spare the time to see him through this. Todd's been great, and your father's taken a pretty keen interest in him too, considering he's a Muggle and all."

Gabriella nodded with a shrug, and took a sip of her soda. Something was gnawing at her. She looked away and then back to Harry. "If everything's so great, why am I so worried?" she said, and then took another sip. "If Papa swears he never knew about you, then why was that snake Snape sniffing about?" Harry took her soda, set it on the table and then held both her hands.

"Babe," he said, still holding to the smile he'd been wearing, "All my life I've been watched over. All summer there was a witch or wizard watching our every move." She raised her eyebrows. "Our every move," Harry repeated. "Hell, I'm sure I'm being watched right now." Remembering Mr. Weasley's words, Gabriella started looking about the room, but Harry squeezed her hands to gather her attention.

“Snape probably was asked to stop by and check out the new Wizarding family across the street. Merlin knows he wouldn’t do it on his own.”

He kissed her gently, and pulled her close. “I’m tired of trying to read danger where there is none. It’s pretty obvious when it arrives. Believe me, I know its eyes.” She turned in his arms and leaned back against his chest, and together they watched as a girl came over and asked Duncan to dance. At first, he hesitated, but after a push on the shoulder by Todd, he finally moved out to the dance floor.

“For now,” he whispered in her ear, “this’ll do.” On the dance floor, a broad smile broke on Duncan’s face as he attempted a dance move that looked something like a robot. Both Harry and Gabriella laughed, and he pulled her close against his chest. “Yeah, this’ll do.”

Chapter 56 - Friendship

It was strange really, surrounded by magical objects, talking portraits, and the occasional explosion downstairs followed by raucous laughter. Had he really only been gone two weeks? When Ron entered the Gryffindor common room, his pockets were filled with free samples of Fred and George's latest concoction. "Not yet for sale," he said, which Hermione translated into unsafe and untested. The as-yet unnamed silver chews caused the chewer's hair to stand on end, sparkle and then explode in a flash of red and green, only to have the hair reappear just as it was originally. When Ron offered Harry one, he passed. Harry had taken considerable care to use his hair to hide the fact that his scar had vanished, and he didn't need to turn bald and show everyone, at least not yet.

His interactions on the train ride to Hogwarts were minimal at best. Most everyone was talking to Neville or Luna, primarily asking them to describe what You-Know-Who really looked like. Odd, Harry thought. It was as if the monster he'd portrayed in Defense Against the Dark Arts was fabricated, or imaginary. Others showered Ron with dozens of questions, most asking about You-Know-Who, or how Ron saved the school during the attack. His name had prominently appeared in the Daily Prophet since Neville and Luna's rescue, one article going so far as to wonder if he would follow in his father's footsteps to become Minister one day. To say that Ron was beaming couldn't touch the fact that his face had a permanent smile attached to it. Harry wondered how long it would take for those little used muscles to lock that way permanently.

The only person who spent any time at all talking with Harry on the Hogwarts Express was Cho, and really Cho spent most the time listening to Harry talk about Gabriella. When he caught himself going on about her, he stopped and apologized, but Cho simply smiled. "I think it's wonderful, Harry," she said, holding her hand to his face. "You deserve to be happy for a change." For her part, Cho described her intense therapy sessions at St. Mungo's, and Harry noticed that they had paid off. She was walking with only the slightest of limps, and the use of her arm had completely returned.

“They’ll be mad not to take you back on the team,” said Harry, encouragingly.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said defiantly. “I look forward to putting Slytherin in their place this term.”

The strangest encounter Harry had was with Draco Malfoy. They were both ascending the steps to the second floor just after an early dinner in the Great Hall, when the staircase moved. Harry didn’t notice Malfoy until a voice from behind cursed the stairs’ motion. When Harry turned to see who swore, he first thought he saw a ghost. Malfoy looked awful. It wasn’t really possible to say that Malfoy looked more pale, but perhaps his face was more gray. His hair had lost much of its golden yellow color, and it too appeared dull. His steel eyes were sunken, undercut by dark rings, and his face gaunt. Malfoy was no ghost, but any less color and he would be. There was, however, something new. On each ear Malfoy wore what looked like a silver hoop earring. Harry couldn’t quite make them out, and instead glanced about to make sure the two were alone.

“Hey, Draco,” he said trying to muster a steady tone. “You okay?”

Malfoy just looked up at Harry, his eyes seemingly unable to focus, wandering about the portraits on the walls as if searching for hidden spies. When they finally settled back on Harry, they bore a look of disgust. “Potter,” he spat, drawing his robes more tightly about him. It wasn’t the greeting Harry expected considering he’d saved Draco’s father from death days earlier. When the staircase stopped, Harry moved to the next floor. Malfoy, however, turned and went back to the lower floor without saying another word. His movement down toward the dungeons was wrong. Not the graceful elegance of a cocky aristocrat, but almost a scuttle, like a spider backing away from its prey.

There was another explosion, a small shriek, and then more madcap laughter from the common room downstairs. Through Harry’s dorm room window, he could see the evening’s shadows stretch across the frozen fields. Hagrid’s hut puffed wisps of smoke as if signaling the time was near. Before Harry left Little Whinging, he had told her of the mirrors. He had a vague idea how they might work, and they

promised to try them tonight as the sun set. He held the square silver frame in his hand and wondered if she was doing the same on Privet Drive. The sun was painfully slow tonight, but finally it acquiesced, letting the earth rise up to meet it, swallowing its brightness until only a small speck of light called out, telling all it would be reborn tomorrow before finally disappearing to darkness. Harry waited no longer.

"Gabriella," he called to the square frame. "Gabriella can you..." Before his eyes, the mirror filled with smoke, which faded until a shadowy image appeared, slowly coming to focus. Her face, confused, and calling his name, came into sharpness in the glass before him, and then suddenly smiled as it became clear she could see him too.

"Harry!" she said with a grin. "I can't believe these work! Was the train ride better this go?"

"Hi," said Harry dreamily, not really listening to the question. It was as if she were there with him, and suddenly the snubs on the train, the attention for Ron, and the dull anger festering in Malfoy's eyes no longer mattered. "How are you? Did you tell him?" he asked. Gabriella bit her lower lip, and looked away. Merlin she was beautiful.

"I know I said I would, but I didn't," she said nervously. Harry's heart completely melted. There was something about the look of fear, or anxiety, on her face that so contrasted with the normally confident and secure woman he knew. He'd seen it in her eyes only a handful of times, and he loved her for it just that much more.

"Take your time, Gab," he said softly. "You've got to be ready, but don't take too long," he encouraged.

"I won't. I swear," she said, in her best Harry inflection.

"Now that's not fair!" he laughed. Before long, they were talking a lot about nothing in particular. When they finished, she asked to try the mirrors again tomorrow night, but Harry had to push back his next call to the weekend. Gryffindor's first Quidditch practice was tomorrow night. Katie was insistent about it on the train, reminding Harry three

times that they needed to get ready for Hufflepuff, and warning him not to get into any detentions.

When he had said goodbye for the last time, Harry gently placed the mirror back in his trunk, and noticed the portrait Soseh had made. He pulled it out, admiring the colors of the sunset, and the glow of Gabriella's brown skin. He decided he would mount it above his bed and levitated it against the wall, placing a sticking charm on it. He heard footsteps climbing the stairs when he noticed his own likeness in the portrait. His forehead no longer bore the single bolt of lightning above his right eye. "That's not possible," he whispered. He was about to look closer when his dorm mates appeared through the door.

"Hey, Harry!"

"Harry."

"Hey, mate!"

Seamus, Neville, and Ron all came in together. Seamus flopped onto his bed, which to Harry still felt like Greg Goyle's in many ways.

"Has Ron told ye abou' him seein' Voldemort?" Seamus asked. "Says he was carried out on his back, he was. Do ye figure he was dead?"

"No," Harry answered immediately. "He's not dead."

"I don' know, Harry," Seamus challenged. "Luna says he buckled over in a right fit."

"Look," said Harry calmly grabbing some parchment and a quill, "I promised Katie we'd get some plays together for tomorrow's practice. Besides, Ron led us all back into the Burrow. He saw. I'm sure he can tell you everything." Harry cast an unnecessarily cool look at the redhead. "Right, chum?"

"Er... yeah, I guess so," Ron said, puffing out his chest.

Harry was about to leave when he turned to Neville. "It's good to have you back, Neville."

"It's good to be back," he replied. Neville looked as happy as he had ever seen him. Between he and Ron, Harry thought, the room might burst with teeth. Looking at Neville, no one would know that for over a month Voldemort himself had tortured him. The first hint of concern crawled into Harry's mind. Had it been too easy?

"I'd like to talk some later, if you don't mind," Harry asked.

"Sure," Neville nodded.

Harry went downstairs, and out through the portrait of the Fat Lady, to an imaginary meeting with Katie Bell. He simply dropped the quill and parchment to the floor, and wandered down the corridor. There was some time to kill before curfew. He thought of the library, or the Great Hall, but he didn't feel much like talking to other people. Finally he settled on a visit with Tonks. He was near her office by the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom when he heard a rustling noise in an alcove behind two suits of armor. The candlelight was dim here, not lit for traffic at this time of night. He looked back down the corridor noting that he was alone. He pulled his wand, and quietly, slowly, stepped around the first suit. Barely visible in the corner was a figure holding a small flask and drinking lustfully. A pebble cracked on the floor under Harry's weight, and the figure spun stepping into the light and brandishing a wand. Harry was about to strike when he saw who it was. His heart actually skipped in fright.

The light and shadow played tricks on Harry's eyes making Malfoy's face appear even more sunken and sallow. He looked like the living dead as he held his wand only a few inches from Harry's face. "Potter," he spat, spraying whatever liquid he was drinking all over Harry's glasses. The smell was foul. "You son of a bitch. I... I should kill you right here, and be done with it!"

"Draco?" Harry asked with sincere concern. "Are you feeling alright?" Malfoy wiped his mouth roughly with his sleeve. As on the staircase, he was most certainly un-Malfoy like. He was almost hunched, motioning Harry against the wall with his wand. Harry obliged. "Draco, what's going on? I thought..."

"You thought wrong!" Malfoy sneered. He threw the bottle in the corner and it shattered sending a sharp echo down the empty corridor as the shards splashed across the stone floor.

"You've been drinking, haven't you?" accused Harry. "What is it? Fire whiskey?"

Malfoy let out a sound as if to laugh, but the muscles on his face didn't oblige the look. Instead they twisted and distorted his face into something akin to a dried tomato. "How half-blood of you, Potter," he drawled. "As if I would bother with something so pathetically benign." He still held his wand in Harry's face, but Harry could tell Malfoy's eyes were losing their focus.

"Draco, what's wrong? You shouldn't be drinking that stuff. You're not thinking straight."

"Oh, I've got it straight. Do you see this? Do you see it?" he yelled, holding his finger to the scar on his face that Harry knew all too well. Harry simply nodded. "Well, after You-Know-Who's people got walloped in their attack of the school, he didn't take it too well." Malfoy pressed the tip of his wand to Harry's throat, and sneered clenching his teeth. "It wasn't enough that you ripped my father's arm off. You had..."

"I didn't..."

"Shut up!" Malfoy screamed, his wand hand shaking enough to rub the skin under Harry's chin raw. He took a breath, and then spoke very calmly. "It wasn't enough that you ripped my father's arm off. You had to leave me with this mark, already garnering me more attention than I needed." Malfoy stepped closer. "He decided it was bad luck. Can you imagine? 'Lucius, remove the mark.' And so father tried. Envision having the flesh ripped off your face over and over again. That's what it felt like, Potter. All night father tried, until he was too weak to carry on. Finally, even the Dark Lord gave it a go." Malfoy dropped his wand and turned. "Every night, he would try something new, every night he would fail, and every night we would BOTH curse your name. I would have willingly died, Potter, begging him to stop.

The only thing giving me the will to go on was father's potions, and..." he spun like a cat, grabbed Harry by the throat with his bare hands, and pressed him against the wall, "...devising ways to make you pay."

The thought of ruining the sickly wizard before him flashed for only an instant across Harry's mind. He hated Draco Malfoy, he always had. But this... this thing standing here was not Draco Malfoy. For some reason, Harry felt something quite different than hate coursing through his veins. What it was, he couldn't quite lay his finger on, but it wasn't hate. Then he noticed the earrings. They weren't silver, but white gold. And they weren't simple hoops, but each was the shape of a curled snake with ruby red eyes that glowed in the darkness.

"Where's he gone?" Harry asked, but Malfoy didn't answer. "We can win, Draco. He's ill, he needed help. Where did they take him?" Malfoy was silent, his grip tightening, but whatever potion he'd swallowed was starting to take effect. "Draco, I need you." The words had an immediate impact. The grip about Harry's neck relaxed completely, and for a moment Malfoy's eyes appeared to clear. They darted back and forth between Harry's own green eyes, as if searching for the meaning behind Harry's words. And then Malfoy's eyes rolled up in his head, and he began to fall backwards against one of the suits of armor. Harry caught him in his arms, and slowly lowered him to the floor.

"Let go," Malfoy said, flailing his arms. "Get away from me!" He pushed Harry away, but there wasn't much effort in it. "I... I... got to get back to Slyderin," he slurred. He took a deep breath and miraculously managed to make it to his feet. He took a few steps staggering down the corridor toward the common rooms. Harry made an effort to help, but Malfoy pulled his wand again. "Back away. This isn't over, P-Potter. Don't... don't think for a s-second that..." He turned, never finishing his sentence, and continued to stagger down the hall.

Harry watched until he was out of sight. When Malfoy turned the corner, Harry rubbed his neck, and then ran his fingers through his hair. In his heart there was more hope than hate, more concern for Draco than derision. If Malfoy was acting strangely, Harry had to think

that so too was he, only he no more noticed his own change in behavior than the fact that his hair had grown another inch while he was away on vacation.

Harry barely made it back to the Gryffindor common room before curfew. He was unable to find Tonks, and with Malfoy's distraction had little time to look about the castle. Thankfully, things had quieted down. A few students were already studying for tomorrow's classes... miniature Hermione's Harry thought, while the rest had retreated to their dormitories. He headed up the stairs himself when he spotted the orphan, Patrick O'Riley, asleep in one of the chairs by the fire. Harry walked over to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey, Pat, I'm not a prefect or anything, but you can't sleep in here unless you're studying."

Patrick blinked his eyes. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry Harry," he blinked some more, sitting taller in the chair. "I won't... Wait. What'd yeh say?"

"Best get to bed," said Harry ruffling the first year's hair. "It'll be a long day tomorrow. The professors always try to be hard noses the first day we're back from vacation. Get some proper sleep."

Patrick took to his feet, rubbing his face with his hands. "Yeah, I guess yer right." He started up the stairs, as Harry took the seat he vacated. "Did yeh have a good vacation, Harry?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, I guess. You?"

"The Changs were great," said Patrick with a smile, and Harry smiled back nodding. "See yeh tomorrow, Harry."

"Goodnight, Pat"

Harry sat in the chair and just gazed into the fire. It would be a hellish day tomorrow, but he knew it was early enough they'd still be talking upstairs. He realized that, except for sleeping on the train, he hadn't spent any time just sitting quietly and thinking all vacation. He leaned back closing his eyes, let out a slow breath, and almost instantly his thoughts turned to the vivificus stone, now hidden by the Invsitata

spell on his desk upstairs. Ideas of Grigor and who he was swam by, and then all thought landed squarely on the riddle to get his godfather back. "Welled from source of endless magic," he whispered to himself. "Obviously not me. I wonder..."

"Hi," a kind voice said, tapping him on the shoulder. It was Hermione. She was dressed in pajamas, but she wore the diamond necklace Harry had given her for her birthday. Harry hadn't seen it on her since the day he gave it to her. "Mind if I sit down?" she asked with a lightness in her voice that told Harry their conversation was about to be anything but.

"I thought you were a starlet now," Harry said in an all too snotty tone. "The girlfriend of the famous Ron Weasley. Surely you don't have time..." Hermione turned and began to walk away. Harry watched her take a few steps and called her back. "Wait! I'm sorry. It's just all been too weird, you know?" She turned back and nodded. Then she sat in the chair next to Harry. "Did you just come from upstairs?" he asked, hoping for some information.

"Yes," she answered. "The boys are getting ready for bed. Ron's voice is essentially gone, and his face muscles have started to cramp up he's been smiling so much today." They both laughed and Hermione caught Harry looking down at her necklace. She rolled it between her fingers, then ran her hand across the diamonds. "I figured his ego was boosted enough he wouldn't mind. I do love them you know."

"Good," Harry said, a bit indifferently. "That's what it's all about... boosting Ron's ego."

"I can't believe you're jealous!" shot back Hermione with a high voice.

"I'm not!" snapped Harry. "It's just... well... it wasn't Ron that put Voldemort on his back, was it?" Harry asked, not really wanting an answer. "If that hadn't happened, Luna and Neville would still be chained to his wall. Nobody seems to realize that little part, do they?" He folded his arms tight around his chest and glared at the fire. He wasn't jealous... he wasn't! If there was anyone who hated extra attention, it was Harry Potter. He just wanted... what did he want?

Hermione silently watched him as the emotions rose and fell across his face. She was used to the twists and turns, only this time, perhaps, she saw something a bit different... something new. Finally she spoke with a soft voice.

"Is it really so terrible that Ron have the limelight for awhile?"

Harry sighed and shook his head. "No," he whispered. "Of course not." He took another breath, unfolded his arms, and looked at Hermione with a smile. "Helping Neville's parents was bloody brilliant. He deserves a medal for that one." Harry's smile was tinged with concern. "Certainly you've seen him without his shirt on. Have you checked the scars on his neck? Have they gone down?" Hermione blushed in the firelight.

"They were pretty bad, but Madame Pomfrey's worked out a new spell, and a healer from St. Mungo's has him taking a regular potion. They're getting better." Hearing the words, Harry slowly nodded.

"Good," he said firmly. "Only two weeks until Hufflepuff. We need the Keeper fit."

"You're not seriously only concerned because of Quidditch?" Hermione howled. Harry just looked at her with a sly grin, and she shoved him on the shoulder. The two sat and stared at the fire, listening to the crackles and pops. Eventually, they were the only two left in the common room. Hermione looked around and shifted uncomfortably in her chair. The move did not go unnoticed by Harry, who feigned a yawn, stretching his arms wide.

"I really should get to..."

"Did you see Tonks tonight?" Hermione asked innocently.

So they were going there, Harry thought to himself. It only took a bit over an hour, but at least he knew why she was there. Perhaps, he'd known all along. She was there not to be a friend, but to gather information. He had hoped she would want to discuss Malfoy, or

perhaps to divine a new strategy for studying this new term. Instead, she was going to stick her nose in and ruin everything.

"I'm really tired, Hermione," he said with his best tired voice. "I'll see you tomorrow." Rubbing his face, he took to his feet to leave.

"Harry," she started again, "I really need to know. Did you see Tonks?"

He didn't want to be angry, it just welled up from inside. Some part of him was trying to cool the fire kindling in his veins, but he'd have none of it.

"Wasn't it bad enough you had to nose your way in and listen to me talk to Tonks in private at Grimmauld Place? No! You had to go and try to butt your way in between Gabriella and me!"

"I wasn't..."

"Is this how you get your kicks now? Or has the Order given you the job to spy on Harry Potter and report back whatever you see and hear?"

"I am no spy!" snapped Hermione, now taking to her feet and facing Harry head on.

"Then why ask what I'm doing? Why ask who I speak to? Why follow me around like a lost puppy searching for scraps of information, if not to spit them back up for the Order?" Then Harry's eyes narrowed. "Or is it the Ministry?" he sneered, as if he detested the word.

Hermione stared silently in defiance.

"It is! I don't bloody believe it!" Harry howled. "You're working for the Ministry of Magic. Do you know how many Ministry officials Voldemort has under his thumb?"

"Not Ron's dad!"

“NO?” Harry spat. The anger had fully engulfed him, and he was going to win this argument with Hermione on all fronts, and at all costs. “Bloody convenient the way he came swooping in at the last second to save the day right behind Fudge who was killed. Only, Minister Weasley doesn’t get so much as a scratch!

“I can’t believe you’d think that!”

“And then, right after the rescue, he comes to search my house, MY HOUSE, as if I’m a criminal,” he raged. He wasn’t really listening to what he was saying; it was just that he wanted Hermione to leave him alone. He needed to make this about anything, about anybody, besides Tonks. He pulled his wand flicking popped embers back into the fire. “And... and Mrs. Weasley... she hates me so much for ruining her precious sons, why doesn’t she move out of Grimmauld Place and go back to the Burrow? Hell, the whole lot of them can run back to that dump if they think I...” He turned to see Ron at the bottom of the stairs. In his hand was a jacket Harry knew to be Hermione’s. The three stood there staring at each other for a moment. Harry could feel the sizzle in his soul hiss as the cool waters of the moment doused his emotions. He took a step toward his friend. “Ron, I...”

“Hermione,” said Ron, stepping down past Harry and holding out the jacket. “You left this upstairs. I thought I’d catch you down here reading, but I guess...” he stopped, casting a sullen glance toward Harry, and then sighed. “Anyway, goodnight.” He kissed her on the cheek, and walked by Harry and back up the stairs without saying a word.

Harry watched in silence as Ron returned to the boys’ dormitory. When he disappeared, Harry cried out, rounding on one of the common room’s study tables. “Arrrgh!” he yelled, flipping the table over with his hands, and then holding out his right arm, he called, “Diffindo!” to sunder the table in two. Only, nothing happened. Frustrated, he kicked one of the upturned table legs hurting his foot in the process. “Damn it!” he cursed, hopping on one foot.

“Here,” Hermione said, taking him by the shoulders and helping him back over to the chair by the fire. “Let me have a look.” She took off

his boot, and examined the foot. "I don't think it's broken," she said. "Does this hurt?" she asked, grasping his big toe and giving it a yank.

"Ayyy!" he yelled. "Yes. Yes, it hurts."

"Good," she snapped. "Serves you right!" She grabbed the boot and tossed it in Harry's face. "Ron Weasley is the closest thing you have to a blood brother, Harry Potter, and you have the audacity to smear his family's name? The same family that only ever treated you as their own son? For the last six months he's called me his girlfriend, but all he ever talks about is you. Everything he does, he does for Harry Potter. He'd lie for you... he'd die for you, and all you can do is complain he has more lines in the bloody newspaper!" She glared at Harry, whose own eyes were, at the moment, empty, then shook her head. "I don't care what you think about me, Harry, but don't ever insult the Weasleys again, or I'll hex you so bad you won't walk for a week!" She grabbed her jacket, and started for the stairs.

"Hermione," Harry said softly, not turning, but rather staring into the dying embers of the fire. He could hear her footsteps stop to listen. Harry smiled to himself. She would always stop to listen, he thought. "Would it be so bad to try?" he asked. "He's my godfather, after all." He could hear her steps return to the back of the chair, but his eyes remained fixed on the orange glow before him.

"Harry, have you spoken to Tonks today?" she asked.

"No," he answered quietly. "I ran into Malfoy instead. He looks half dead, if you ask me. Some sort of potion he's taking, and it's messing with his mind." Again there was another long pause, and Harry felt compelled to ask again. "Would it, Hermione? Would it be so bad to try?"

"What's it worth to you?" she finally asked.

"Everything."

"Really? Would you hand the keys of the world to Voldemort, just to bring back Sirius?"

"She's not working for..."

"Yes she is, Harry. And you know it."

An ember popped from the fire, and before it hit the ground Harry had his wand out and repelled it back into the fire. "I can't do it without a wand, anymore," he said flatly.

"I noticed," she said, moving to the chair at his side. Harry took in a deep heave of air, and exhaled it in a long slow sigh.

"I'm such a jerk," he said, shaking his head.

"You know," she smiled, "it'd take the courage of a true Gryffindor to climb up there and apologize right now." She reached over and gave Harry a hug. "I think we can save talk of Voldemort and his minions for tomorrow, don't you?" Harry smiled back.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Some things are more important." He slipped on his boot and limped on up the stairs, leaving Hermione to read a book by candlelight. He would worry about his wounded foe tomorrow... the foe whose darkness even now shadowed the castle walls. For the moment, he would turn his attention on what was important-- bravery, loyalty, and friendship.

Chapter 57 - A Fine Team

"He shoots... he scores! Ten points for Hufflepuff!"

Though Ron scowled fiercely, the Hogwarts crowd erupted in a cacophony of cheers for the underdog. Even a few of the dozens of Aurors surrounding the pitch clapped. Thirty minutes into the most guarded match in Hogwarts history, Gryffindor was up fifty to nothing when Zacharias Smith of Hufflepuff charged the center ring with the Quaffle. Ron had seen Elenor Branstone trailing behind her teammate, but focused instead on the leader. It was an obvious feint, only Ron missed it. At the last moment, Smith tossed the Quaffle to Branstone who scored through the left ring. It was the first goal scored on Ron Weasley in competition or at practice all year. As Madame Hooch flew to reset the Quaffle, Harry came over to Ron.

"Zach dropped his shoulder just before the charge," Harry coached. "He had to be thinking of throwing to his left."

"Yeah?" Ron glowered. "Well, I wouldn't know what he was thinking now, would I?"

Harry's face broke into a smile, and a moment later so did Ron's. The redhead's newest treatments had helped shrink the foreign nerve tissue growing into his brain. The voices pounding into his head were fading, and it required effort to read minds, effort he chose to leave off the field.

"Would you two break it up!" Katie yelled from the center of the pitch.

"You'd better keep your eyes peeled, Harry," said Ron. "I don't think we'll be able to run the score on them, so we're going to need the Snitch."

"I don't know about that," Harry shrugged. "You've blocked eight good shots on goal already. That's damn sharp, and..." Madame Hooch's whistle blew, spinning Harry around. In an instant he shot past the Hufflepuff Seeker Summerby nearly knocking him from his broom, and high over the pitch into the cool, clear air. On a day like today, he had no need for the warming charms of his broom, and chose to

suppress them and enjoy the crisp feel of the blustery air against his face. Harry focused hard on the field below searching for any golden glint that might reveal his quarry.

"Watch it!" a voice yelled. There was a loud thump just behind Harry's left ear. Jack Sloper clobbered a Bludger down toward Smith below. The Bludger shot wide as Jack cursed, but Smith seeing the Bludger heading his way swung wildly to the side and missed a pass from Branstone. A blur, Dennis Creevey had the loose Quaffle in his arms shot straight for the center ring and scored before the Hufflepuff Keeper could react. Both Harry and Jack pumped their fists.

"That one nearly took your head off, Harry," Jack cautioned, and Harry nodded.

"Thanks for the save."

"You were right about Smith being skittish after being cracked in the skull last match. He nearly flew out of his shorts, and that shot was way off target." He lowered his head a bit. "Goyle would have had him off his broom."

"Hey," Harry said brightly. "You saved my skull, that counts for something, doesn't it?" At this Sloper smiled, tightened his hand about his bat, and spun down toward the field just as Hooch's whistle blew again.

Earlier in the year, Harry would have sensed the Bludger coming and been well out of its way... the work of the protection charm he figured. But now, that sixth sense, and his ability to perform any serious magic without the use of his wand had vanished completely. Along with his scar, whatever happened at the falls had removed the effects of Grigor's spell, and the special gifts it had given him. Fortunately, he was released from the whistling charm, and while the mark remained on his forearm, it no longer ached. It was Dobby who declared him free of darkness. He was late returning from the library last night when the house elf jumped him from behind. "It is gone!" he screamed with glee.

“Shhhhhh,” Harry hissed trying to quickstep to the common room before Filch caught him out after curfew, the house elf clutched tightly about his neck. But Dobby would have none of it.

“Harry Potter is free of the dark mark!” he yelled. “How? Dobby knows the great Harry Potter is wise and a great magician. But how did Harry Potter succeed where all other wizards failed?” He was now bouncing gleefully on the floor in front of Harry.

“Dobby, be quiet,” Harry pleaded. “This isn’t...”

“Was the magician the great Professor Dumbledore? Yes... yes, of course. Dobby should have known...”

“It wasn’t anybody,” Harry cut in quietly under his now panting breath. They were ascending the staircase now, not much further. “It was burned out of me, or washed out, or... I don’t know.”

Dobby stopped cold, grabbing Harry by the cloak. “Washed?”

“Dobby, let go!” Harry hissed again. “I’m late, and if I don’t...”

“Then what the Centaurs say is true.” The house elf’s eyes were wide. He then realized he had grabbed Harry’s robe, and let go immediately. “Dobby is sorry, sir,” he said looking, not at Harry, but at his hand. The Gryffindor picked up on this at once. Dobby had information about the falls, or at least what they were.

“What’s true?” Harry asked, bending down low to one knee. This always made Dobby blush, and as the house elf regained his composure to speak, an all too familiar meow echoed from above. They looked up to see Mrs. Norris glaring down at them. Immediately, the house elf vanished, leaving Harry alone on the steps. A moment later, Mr. Filch appeared holding an unlit lantern in one hand.

“Surprise. Surprise,” he sneered. “What have we here, Mrs. Norris? A bit of treasure for the dungeons.” He put one foot down on the steps leading to Harry. “Do you think, Potter, I have time to chase after the likes of you and Mr. Malfoy all night?” Knowing the routine far better than he should, Harry rose to his feet and started immediately toward

Professor McGonagall's office. "At least you're clean," Filch said with a sigh.

"Clean?" Harry asked, as the two descended the staircase.

"Found the little rat just after curfew huddled up in the corner, vomit all over himself and my floor!" Filch exclaimed, clearly more agitated that he had to clean the floor. "And Peeves has made a right mess of it down in the dungeons backing up all the toilets. "I suspect you and Malfoy will have a splendid time cleaning the muck up together." Filch chuckled out loud imagining the bickering that would ensue when the two students would be in detention together. Fortunately for Harry, Professor McGonagall postponed the detention to Saturday night after the Quidditch match with Hufflepuff, and Snape agreed to do the same for Malfoy.

And so it was the Harry found himself flying on the south side of the pitch, hoping that the match would carry well into the night. There was a sudden groan from the crowd. Katie had taken a Bludger to the back. Her posture was crooked, but she was still flying. If they lost her, the tide of the match would change. Harry redoubled his efforts to find the Snitch.

The Gryffindor lead was ninety, when he saw it. The sun was beginning to cast long shadows out onto the grass below, and the Snitch flashed for only a moment between the shades of dark and light. It was all the time Harry needed, and he rocketed down at once. The motion was not lost on the crowd, which swooned, nor on Summerby, who darted to intercept Harry at once. Harry kept both eyes fixed on the Snitch, now flying fast for the west side of the pitch, while with the corner of his right eye he noted Summerby closing quickly... too quickly. Harry cursed under his breath--the Hufflepuff had the better position. This was going to be close, too close for Harry's liking. He pressed down on his Caduceus trying to pick up speed. He had the better broom, but Summerby had the better angle. Harry needed a different tack. Basic Seeker training warned to never anticipate the movement of the Snitch; rather track it and react to its ever-random movements. But Harry had had no choice; if the Snitch flew straight, or dodged north, Summerby would have it. On his current path, there was also a better than good chance he would lose

to Summerby if the Snitch chose to dart any other direction but up. He chose to improve his odds and guided his broom just south of the Snitch. The Gryffindor crowd groaned in disapproval, thinking he'd lost sight of the golden orb now careening straight toward them.

Even as the wind screamed in Harry's ears, he felt it. Only meters away from the stands, his eyes noticed they were drifting to the south. A goodly gust of wind from the north had pushed Snitch and Seeker alike, like leaves on a fall day. No one, not even Ron, would believe his theory that Snitches had personalities all their own. To Harry the Snitch the Gryffindor team practiced with almost always preferred to hide about the edges of the pitch, and when it was found it used more speed than agility to try to escape. Katie called it rubbish.

"They're all given the same standard charm, and they all respond in the same random way," she'd say, rolling her eyes.

This Snitch... this Snitch... Harry pulled up hard on his broom. Even the Caduceus had trouble responding with his sudden command to pull out of the dive and turn north into the wind. It looked as if he was trying to collide with Summerby rather than let him catch the Snitch, but the Hufflepuff Seeker simply ducked low and passed under Harry's feet mocking Harry as he passed by and tracking for the Snitch to carry straight on. The Hufflepuff's hands were mere inches from the Snitch, when, in a blink, it turned into the wind and shot high. A blink more and the stands erupted as Harry grabbed it in his waiting hands. He held it high above his head, grinning broadly, and then his face fell slightly. There would be time for dinner, but no celebration tonight. Tonight he would enjoy the pleasant company of a very sour Slytherin, while cleaning the dungeons for Filch.

He was struck by his fellow teammates and flown straight into the Gryffindor stands as everyone cheered. Hagrid sat among them; his eyes were still wide in amazement.

"That... that was brilliant, Harry," he beamed. "It's as if yeh read the bloody bird's mind!"

"Thanks Hagrid, but..."

"You two!" a voice yelled out from the back of one of the guest boxes. A tall figure in dark robes was standing up pointing in Harry's direction, but he was silhouetted by the sun, forcing Harry to shield his eyes. Harry looked about to see who he was calling.

"You with the glasses," he yelled again, stepping down towards them. "Potter, right? And the redhead, er... Winglsey?" When he shifted his position out of the sun, the group of Gryffindors let out a collective gasp. Dressed in long flowing robes of black with hand stitched white piping, stood Terrence Tellman of the Montrose Magpies, current leaders in the British and Irish League. He was holding a rolled program in his right hand and was tapping it against the other, smiling as he stepped close.

"H-Harry," Ron sputtered nervously, "It's Tellman of the bloody Magpies... here!"

"I know who it is," Harry hissed back through his smiling teeth. The sea of red and gold parted as the large wizard approached the pair.

"Some flying, son," Tellman said with a grin. He stood well over six feet with broad shoulders and hands that looked strong enough to crack walnuts. Standing so close to such a very large Quidditch professional, Harry suddenly felt very small. His hazel eyes peered down at Harry. "How long have you been playing Seeker?"

"S-Six years, sir," Harry said. Tellman whistled.

"Then it's true. You started in your first year." He stroked his chin pensively, and then turned to Ron. "And you, Wingsley?"

"Weasley, sir," answered Ron.

"Not the Minister's son?" Tellman questioned in surprise. Ron shrugged and nodded his head. "Merlin, then I've hit the jackpot." Ignoring everyone else, he put his arms about Harry and Ron, and started to walk away from the crowd. "Tell me, boys... how'd you like to leave school a bit early, and have a go as pros? I dare say with you two on board there wouldn't be an empty seat in the house."

“On the Magpies?” Ron cried out. “You can’t be serious!”

“Oh, but I am,” replied Tellman, his teeth still beaming in the glowing sun. The look reminded Harry a bit of Gilderoy Lockhart. “I’d heard the reports, and had to see it for myself... unbelievable play, simply unbelievable.”

“Well of course we’d be interested!” howled Ron excitedly. “When do we start?”

“Hold on,” said Harry sternly. “Mr. Tellman, we’ve another year to go here at Hogwarts.”

“For what?” Ron howled. “So Snape can make you redo perfectly prepared potions? Or do you want to stay so you can clean backed up toilets?”

“You know perfectly well why. I would think you, as Prefect...”

“A prefect that’s smart enough to know when galleons are headed my way. This is my chance, Harry. You’ve already got your estate. Let me make enough to have my own!”

“Ron, you can’t be serious,”

“Fine!” Ron turned his back on Harry and faced Tellman. “Well, he can stay. I’ll go.”

The Magpies’ number one Chaser puckered a bit and clucked his tongue. “Sorry, Weasley. It’s really a package deal, boys. My manger wants you both.” He gently tapped each of their heads with the rolled up program in his hand.

“Surely you can...” Ron started, but Tellman held out his hand.

“He has his reasons, son,” he interrupted. “Believe me, he has plans for both of you.” Tellman’s smile seemed to twist a bit at these words, but Ron was oblivious, still glowering at Harry. “Tell you what. Let’s say we bring you both out for a team practice. No commitment. There’s an open tryout the second Saturday of the month. What do

you two say about having a go in February?” Without waiting for an answer, he added, “Here’s my card. You can owl me.”

“Deal,” Ron said, snapping the card out of Tellman’s hand. “No need for an owl, is there, Harry?” Harry looked at Tellman, and then at Ron who gave him a look of pure fire. Finally, Harry nodded his agreement.

“Yes!” Ron hissed through his smiling teeth as he slapped Harry on the shoulder.

Tellman winked and clicked his mouth, then turned and walked back through the crowd that once again parted. He stopped here and there to sign a few autographs, climbed on his broom, and was gone. It had taken less than five minutes, and they were going to get to practice with the Magpies. Harry didn’t want to admit it, but he was giddy inside. Ginny stood and watched the whole encounter, and when it was over wasn’t sure what to say.

“You know,” she started, “you’ll still need permission to leave, and there’s no way...” Her words were drowned out by the crush of gold and red swarming to find out what had happened.

News of the meeting spread quickly throughout the school. At dinner it was all anybody spoke of in the Great Hall. Harry looked up at the head table to find Dumbledore looking down at him. Harry wasn’t sure if there was a smile behind the old wizard’s white beard, or a look of admonishment. What he did know was that there was no hope in trying to sneak out next Saturday night. They’d have to get permission. He was mulling the idea of how to approach Dumbledore when a hand tapped his shoulder from behind. It was Hermione.

“We’re done,” she said. “Are you coming?”

Harry was in no hurry to finish dinner. He poked at his roast beef, which had long ago turned cold. He would not be joining the night’s celebration in Gryffindor tower. Detention with Malfoy would be next. He glanced over to the Slytherin table. Malfoy was looking straight at him with a look of pure hatred. Harry knew that Draco was just as good at Quidditch as he. They were evenly matched at Seeker, and Malfoy had the edge at strategy. Only lately, Harry questioned if

Malfoy could hold any cogent thought in his head. Even Neville was outperforming him in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and there was talk that if his grades didn't improve he might be removed. Ron thought it a brilliant idea, but Harry needed Malfoy... wits intact. To do that, he would have to find a way to get Malfoy to stop the potions nearly everyone knew he was taking.

Harry looked at Hermione over his shoulder. "No," he sighed. "I've got to head to the dungeons and meet Filch for detention." He shoved his plate forward, and it vanished to the kitchens below. He looked back over at the Slytherin table, but Malfoy was gone. He sighed again.

"Be careful, Harry," Hermione said, as he took to his feet. "Malfoy's... well, crazy. Merlin knows what he might do down there with you two alone." Harry simply nodded and started on his way.

The stench became almost unbearable as he descended the stone staircase. What was an awful mess the day before had ripened and now seemed to penetrate his very skin. Harry's neck began to itch and his eyes watered. It was all he could do to stand upright and not wretch. He stepped into the sticky muck just as Peeves, the cause of all before him, shot passed his head.

"Ho-Ho-Ho! Prince Potter and Monarch Malfoy descend to serve as commoners!" chimed Peeves in an overly sing-songy voice. The poltergeist pulled a mirror off the wall and threw it to the floor. Instantly, Harry withdrew his wand and stopped the glass before it was half way down. The speed of the spell surprised Peeves whose pasty face seemed to flame with rage. "I see you're quick with what you've done, but that alone can't spoil my fun!" he jeered. In the next instant he flew directly down toward the suspended mirror intending to shatter it.

"Speculum Captus!" Harry cried out. Peeves hit the glass at blinding speed, but it did not shatter. Instead, his essence seemed to be swallowed whole by the suspended mirror. There was a muffled scream as Harry walked over and took the large mirror in both his hands. He turned it about to find the image of Peeves flitting about banging against each side of the glass.

“Let me out!” he cried. Harry cocked his head in curiosity, then a small smile lifted at the corner of his mouth. “Let me out, Potter!” Harry walked over and stuck the mirror back against the wall. He took a step back crossing his arms, contemplating the trapped spirit. A voice startled him from behind.

“How’d you do that?”

Harry spun to find Malfoy inches from his right shoulder. His face was sunken and large bags hung under his dull gray eyes that hid behind his greasy yellow hair. His breath rivaled that of the stench they were already strolling in.

“Don’t know,” said Harry, shrugging his shoulders. “Can’t ever remember reading about it. The words just came.” Harry narrowed his eyes on the panicking poltergeist. “It’s like I’ve learned the spells of the dead or something.”

“Well,” said Malfoy, turning away from Harry disinterested, “Filch, the cretin, will be eternally grateful if you can keep the creature locked away.” The two students turned to face a squeak on the stairs.

“Cretin, is it Malfoy?” Filch slowly rolled the words out of his mouth, as if chewing over the pending punishment. Eying Malfoy up and down, he was oblivious to his captured nemesis. “You’re not much without daddy around, are you?”

Malfoy glared, a hint of fire returning to his otherwise dead eyes. Filch had no idea the territory he was entering and Harry tried to intervene. “We’ve come to clean the floors, Mr. Filch.” The old man glared at Malfoy for a moment, and then turned on Harry.

“Then get to it!” said Filch with a toothy sneer. Both boys faced the floor and pulled their wands. “No! Put those away. You’ll be using these tonight.” He had two mops in his hands. He handed one to Harry, but busted the other over his knee. “Oops! It broke,” he said looking at Malfoy. Instead he handed him a small cloth barely larger than a handkerchief. “Get busy!” Filch started back up the stairs, holding the mop’s two halves in his hands.

“What’s this?” Malfoy yelled indignantly. “I can’t...”

“Oh... but you will, boy!” Filch chuckled. “Your father was an imperious prick, and I won’t have...”

There was a blinding flash of blue light. Filch stood frozen, his eyes open and his face still twisted in anger. At first Harry thought it some sort of Immobulus spell, but the incantation was wrong, and Filch’s eyes showed no sign of consciousness. “What did you...” Harry began.

“You’re not the only one who’s learned a few things lately, Potter,” Malfoy muttered dryly as he leaned against the wall next to the mirror. Peeves cried out again. “Shut up!” Malfoy yelled. “Or I’ll shatter this mirror and you along with it!” Harry wasn’t sure that would work, but Peeves quieted instantly. Malfoy turned to Harry. “In fact, give the CRETIN a good shove, and be done with him! Shatter the lot!” Malfoy reached into his pocket, pulled out a small silver flask and took a swig letting much of the liquid roll down the front of his neck. Harry walked over to Filch and touched his sleeve. He was cold... ice cold. Malfoy saw the concern on Harry’s eyes, and rolled his own.

“Honestly, Potter,” he drawled. “You look as if I killed your dog.”

“Is he... is he dead?”

“Do you want him to be?” Malfoy asked as if they were talking about a mosquito about ready to be squashed.

“No!” Harry flashed back.

“Well,” Malfoy began. “We can leave him there to thaw. That should take about a year, or I can thaw him now. He won’t remember a thing.”

“Do it!”

“How ‘bout we clean this mess first?” Malfoy suggested.

Harry looked about at the muck. The thought of spending all night with a mop, was more overwhelming than Malfoy's breath. He pulled his wand and started vanishing the grime from the dungeon corridor floor. Malfoy also vanished away the muck, only Harry noted that his wand hand shook and the occasional spell would misfire splattering feces across the parts of the floor Harry had just cleaned. Harry neither teased, nor corrected the error. Indeed, the two boys did not say so much as a word to each other as they made their way down the corridor, side by side.

After an hour passed, they were nearly complete, having now worked their way into the lavatory Peeves originally backed up. Confined as it was, the stench was twice as bad, and they each held an arm over their faces as they continued to remove the filth.

"I say you shatter the bloody mirror over Filch's head!" Malfoy yelled out, having just splattered, instead of vanished, a large collection of clumped, used toilet tissue. "Two for one, I say!" Harry continued to flick his wand. He couldn't imagine trying this with a mop. Even now, his wrist grew weary from the movement of the incantation. Soon after, they were finished. The dungeon corridor and washroom shone brightly--the work of house elves some declared the following day.

As the last bit of dirt was cleared from the washbasins, both students slumped to the floor and wiped their brows. "Not a bad team," Harry said brightly. Malfoy let out a bit of a grunt, reached into his cloak, and pulled out the silver flask.

"Draco... don't," Harry asked, his voice laden with concern. Malfoy looked at Harry and then to the flask.

"What? This?" he asked flippantly. "Just a little something to get by, Potter. That's all." He took a swig and slipped it back in. Harry immediately saw the effect in Malfoy's eyes. What little brightness that was there moments before had now vanished like the filth from the floor. "Just a little... to get by," Malfoy said softly. There was no thirst for power, no hatred of Harry, no love of Quidditch. There was only nothingness, a blankness of emotion that burrowed deep into Malfoy's soul.

"You can't keep doing this," said Harry. "It'll kill you."

"P-Promises, promises," Malfoy muttered with a smirk.

"It's not funny, Draco!" Harry yelled taking to his feet. His mind flashed to Duncan's attempt at suicide. "It's not funny, at all." Taken aback by Harry's tone, Malfoy stood to meet him, albeit more unsteadily.

"And you care, why?" he snapped, trying to focus on Harry's face. "Morgana knows nobody else gives a damn. Everyone's stopped talking to me... even Blaise." His voice trailed off, and his head dropped. Then Malfoy took a deep breath and reached back into his pocket pulling the flask out again. He went to take another drink, but before the bottle met his lips it had vanished. Malfoy turned to see Harry pointing a wand in his face. Still, staring at the holly, his face bore no expression. He shrugged. "There's more where that came from, Potter." He turned to walk out, but Harry grabbed him.

"Damn it Draco, you promised! You swore to me!"

"What does it matter?"

"I need you. I can't do this without you." As before, these words seemed to penetrate Malfoy's façade somehow. "He's sick. I know you know it. I saw your hood in Ron's room at the Burrow." To Harry's surprise, Malfoy's eyes flashed a look of astonishment all their own. "We can win if we do this together, all of us." Malfoy looked away, but Harry grabbed him by the face, pushed back the hair from his eyes and looked intently into the wavering, dull gray pools. "I need you, Draco, to join me. I can't do it alone."

Malfoy's blank eyes looked back into Harry's. They welled, and a small tear made its way down his face, clearing dirt as it fell and leaving his clean, pale skin exposed like a thin white scar paralleling the red dagger beside it. Seeing him like this, Harry wished with all his might that he could remove the scar that he had placed, but he knew he didn't have that power... only Malfoy.

They stood in this odd embrace, for some time as more tears made their way down Malfoy's stoic face. Finally, Harry spoke. "I can heal the body, Draco... not the soul." Without a word, Malfoy turned and briskly walked out the door. Harry followed behind as he strode down the dungeon corridor to the steps. "Draco!" he called, but the Slytherin paid him no heed. "Draco, I need to know... please!" Suddenly, Malfoy stopped, spun on a knut, and began to almost charge at Harry, coming up just short.

"He's alive, Potter," he hissed, fire filling his eyes. "The bastard can't die, don't you know that by now? You can't kill him! We won't win!"

"Then we'll die trying," Harry said in a calm, cold voice, his eyes resolute. The look brought a small smile to Malfoy's face. He nodded, and turned to leave. Stepping over Filch, frozen against the bottom of the stairs, he flicked his wand and a beam of red light bathed the squib in warmth and he instantly revived.

"Honestly, sir," Malfoy drawled. "We do all the cleaning and you just sleep! Bloody cruel if you ask me, don't you agree, Harry?" Hearing his name, Harry smiled, but then quickly put on a face of exhaustion and persecution.

"Cruel," he sighed.

Malfoy dropped his rag filled with muck directly in Filch's lap and it splattered as it hit. Harry pulled over his unused broom and dropped it on the floor. "I think you'll find the floor satisfactory, sir."

Filch was befuddled, but took to his feet and followed the boys up the stairs, wiping at his jacket and only making the situation worse. His ears picked up the faint sound of something below, but he was more interested in getting back upstairs and cleaning his jacket. The only thing the three left behind was the crackle of torchlight along the dungeon corridor, and a wailing Peeves, trapped in a mirror nearly filled to the top with the filth the two young wizards had spent the evening cleaning. A fitting punishment they both agreed.

Chapter 58 - Darkness Returns

He could hear the slow steady splat of water as it pattered onto the ledge beneath the common room window. For the last few days the rain had been light, but steady. The grounds were beginning to warm, and the rain seemed to awaken many of the buds in the trees, and revitalize the lawn, which was shaking off its golden mantle for a new green. It was late, and only he and Patrick were still studying. The first year seemed to take pride in working side-by-side with Harry though he rarely said a word, which suited Harry, who still appreciated the company. Since midnight, Patrick had asked only one question about a wand movement for levitation, and Harry worked with him for a moment, if only to rest his mind from his own studies.

"You'd think I could levitate a feather," Patrick complained. "James can do it in his sleep."

"Ask Seamus about his first time in Flitwick's class," said Harry with a smile and showing the young boy the proper wrist motion. It wasn't long before Patrick was levitating feathers and sheets of paper. With this success, he chose to retire for what was left of the morning's darkness. Soon, the rest of Gryffindor would, themselves, be rising. As the young boy started to put his books in his pack, he looked up at Harry hunched over two sheets of parchment and making notes.

"Is it due tomorrow?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" said Harry, blearily pulling himself away.

"Your assignment, is it due tomorrow?"

"What? This? Er... no," Harry answered. "Something I let slip away from me last year."

Patrick raised his eyebrows, nodding his approval of Harry's tenacity. "Well, goodnight," he said, and ascended up the staircase. Harry returned to the riddles before him.

“Blend the three and turn the key,” he whispered to himself for the hundredth time that night. For weeks he had tried to engage Tonks about the riddles, and for weeks she had rebuffed him with excuse after excuse about how she needed more time, and how it was better that they slow down to do it right. Since she had been no help at all, Harry elected to deduce their meaning for himself. It was strange really, as if she was waiting for the stars and planets to realign, and Harry would often use Tonks’ reticence to demonstrate to Hermione that there was no way the young professor was in league with Voldemort. He sighed, shaking his head. He did not want to start his thoughts down that path again... it was mere distraction and always led to more irritation. “Focus,” he thought.

He and Tonks were sure of one thing... one of the ingredients was Lucius Malfoy’s blood. “...saved from death by hated foe...” was just too perfect a connection. The second ingredient was simply the golden basin, secretly cast by the Black Family for this very purpose... to return the condemned from behind the Curtain of Phenolem.

It had been Hermione who relayed the history lesson from one of Professor Binns’ classes. The great chamber in the bowels of the ministry was once used as an execution hall. Originally, the condemned, often enemies of the state, were executed... put to death in front of hundreds of witnesses, on the large dais that now stands there. To prevent their graves or ghosts from becoming gathering sites for enemies, the bodies were disposed of through the Curtain of Phenolem, a tapestry magically woven to entrap the essence of all that entered, allowing no spirit to escape its confines.

Eventually, the early Ministry discovered that even the living could be thrown through the curtain, saving the trouble of the ghastly execution altogether, although it was endlessly debated which was more cruel. Long after the entire process was banned for being inhumane, Sirius Black’s great grandfather Ogmios Black, the first son of Phineas Nigellus, developed a technique to bring those he summoned back from the curtain. Cruel, dark wizards, sentenced to death centuries before were returned whole and ready to terrorize again, ever loyal to the wizard that set them free.

“Harry, don’t you see?” Hermione pleaded. “Your rescue of Lucius Malfoy is what gave Voldemort the idea. He believed, with your blood, he had all the ingredients, but he was wrong. And now he’s using you through Tonks to find out how to set them free.”

“That’s rubbish!” Harry argued, but his heart wasn’t in it. What he meant to say is, “You’re probably right, but I don’t give a damn, because I’m brining out Sirius, with or without a new army for Voldemort. Do you want to help?”

“Damn!” Harry hissed to himself for letting his mind wander again. He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes, trying to concentrate once more. The rain sprayed against the common room window, driven by a sudden gust of wind. He turned and watched the sheets of water run down the panes of glass on this moonless night. If only he could think of what the last ingredient was, but it was pointless. His mind was fogged, and continued to wander. With a heavy sigh, he rolled his papers, and went to bed.

He entered the boys’ dormitory to find it silent, save for the rhythmic snoring of Seamus Finnigan. It was the one thing about Seamus that Harry didn’t miss while he was gone last term. He slipped off his clothes, patted the stone of cinnabar now hidden on his desk by the Invisata spell, and crawled into bed. He might, at least, get an hour’s rest. Only the rhythm of Seamus’ snores and the pitter-pat, pitter-pat of rain against the dorm window remained, as the fog fully filled his mind. There was a dull ache at his temples, probably from reading too much he thought, as he turned over on his side, cleared his thoughts, and fell asleep.

The next morning his mind was weary, his eyes watered, and his body ached. He felt quite ill, but went to class anyway. In Care of Magical Creatures he sneezed violently, squeezing a fire toad too tightly and causing it to blast a jet of flame over Ron’s arm. Hagrid sent them both to see Madame Pomfrey, Ron for his arm, and Harry for his cold.

“It don’ get yeh outta doin’ yer homework now! Neither of yeh!” Hagrid called after them as they left for the castle.

Turning the corridor to the hospital wing they ran into Malfoy who was just leaving. Well, it was Ron that really ran into him. Their shoulders collided as each tried to negotiate the turn too quickly. Both had their wands at the ready in an instant. Malfoy's two snake earrings seemed to sneer as they glinted in the sunlight streaming through the upper windows. Ron sneered back, narrowing his eyes at the blonde. Malfoy's health had steadily been improving since his detention with Harry nearly three weeks before. His clothes and appearance were far better, but his temperament was as bad as ever.

"Don't tell me your wand backfired again, Weasels," Malfoy drawled, as he looked from Ron's eyes to his burnt arm.

"How 'bout I try it on your face," Ron snapped back. "Oh, sorry, that's already scared for life." The words made Harry wince, and he grabbed Ron by the sleeve.

"You two... just cut it out!" ordered Harry, pulling Ron down the corridor toward the Infirmary.

"Next time, Malfoy," Ron called after the Slytherin. "Next time!"

"I didn't know red-headed garbage dwellers could tell time!" Malfoy howled back with a sneer. Ron lurched, but Harry held fast and pulled him into the hospital wing.

Ron was the first to be treated. Madam Pomfrey carefully examined his arm and, as always, shook her head. "I just don't understand why every time the door to the hospital wing opens I expect to see Ron Weasley, or Harry Potter. Imagine my surprise to see you both wander in today." Her voice was seeped in sarcasm as her eyes rolled to the ceiling.

"Job security, Madame Pomfrey," said Ron brightly. "Job security."

"I don't think I need to worry about that, Mr. Weasley," she said darkly, as she sprinkled a white powder on Ron's arm and then bathed it in blue light with her wand. "The healers have been stretched thin this year, I'm afraid." She let out a sigh. "Although it has been quiet lately."

Harry winced. A sharp pain pulsed at his temples, then faded. Madame Pomfrey looked at him with concern.

"You're not just an escort, Mr. Potter?" she asked, finishing up with Ron's arm, which was now only showing a light sunburned appearance. Still, she wrapped it in light gauze.

"He's got a cold," Ron answered.

"A cold?" Madame Pomfrey scoffed, looking at Harry closely. "Let me see." She stepped over to Harry as he sat on the gurney next to Ron's. "Take off your glasses, please." Harry did so, and she moved her wand in circles about his head while holding a silver disk. "There's no sign of..." and then she saw the now transformed scar on his head. "Merlin, child, what have you done?"

Up until now, no adult had noticed the disappearance of his scar, or if they did, they said nothing about it. Perhaps a handful of Gryffindors had seen a normal forehead, maybe Cho, other than that, very few paid it any attention. Hermione, to the contrary, was convinced there was something more, and as in all things plunged into the library to learn all she could. Over the last two weeks her search had led to nothing new, and Harry noticed her trips to the library begin to dwindle to a mere three or four a day. But how to handle Madame Pomfrey? Harry chose the tried and true method--ignorance.

"Done?" he asked blankly.

"To your forehead! Your scar... it's gone. How?" She leaned in closer, but Harry turned to Ron.

"How's the arm, Ron?" he asked. "Ready to get back to that homework Hagrid was talking about?"

"Er, yeah," Ron quickly stammered. "Right... homework."

"Don't start that with me!" Madame Pomfrey snapped. "Potter, there's nothing wrong with your head except maybe some sneezing from the new blossoms, and probably this." She tapped his blank forehead

with her wand making a dull thunking sound.” Harry continued to look at her as if he was confused. Finally, she handed him some Pepperup Potion. “Very well,” she sighed. “Take a half dose now, and a half dose tomorrow morning. If the headaches don’t stop by lunch tomorrow, you are to return here before dinner, understood?”

Harry nodded.

“I don’t detect any subcutaneous incantation, but if this is some sort of magic to hide your scar...”

“Gee,” interrupted Harry, gulping down the potion. Steam began to billow at once out his ears. “Thanks, Madame Pomfrey.” He sniffed in a deep pull of air through his nose. “Ah... already feel better,” he lied. “Let’s go Ron.”

They were halfway to the Great Hall to eat lunch before either of them said a word. It was Ron who broke the silence.

“He’s back, isn’t he,” he said darkly, looking down at the stone floor as they walked. Harry said nothing; he didn’t have to. Ron let out a deep breath. “A lot of fame for a lot of nothing... so much for vanquishing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. What a waste.” He let out another long sigh. Harry stopped, and grabbed Ron by the arm.

“Waste?” he snapped. “You think it was a waste to save Neville and Luna? Was it a waste to show the Wizarding world where Voldemort’s men were hiding out? Was it a waste to bring Neville’s parents back into his life so they could truly have something wonderful to celebrate for the New Year?” He turned to face his best friend, and whatever jealousy Harry still held to vanished. “It was you, Ron Weasley, who made that happen. You made a difference that matters... Voldemort be damned!”

Ron tried to offer a smile, nodding his head, but his heart wasn’t much in it. There was comfort to be had having Harry Potter as your best friend, and it didn’t stem from his wealth or his fame, but rather from his heart and undying loyalty.

"How bad is it?" Ron asked. Harry shrugged. The pain was different, but somehow he knew it was an omen of Voldemort's return.

"You know how you could hear everyone's thoughts seeping into your head uncontrollably?" Harry asked as they walked along, neither looking at the other. "I've only ever heard one voice... Voldemort's." This time, Ron didn't cringe hearing the name. They walked a little further. "The thing is... this time... it's different somehow." He held his hand to his forehead. "Something's changed." They were nearing the entrance to the Great Hall, and others were converging. Ron caught sight of Hermione and waved with a half-smile. She jogged over to greet him with a kiss, but could tell there was something wrong.

"What's the matter," she asked, as her eyes glanced down to see his bandaged arm. "Are you okay? What happened?" Ron shook his head.

"One thing's certain," Harry continued as if Hermione never appeared. "He's mad." He looked out and seemed to scan the air with his eyes as if reading a book, or thinking about something quite distant. And then he nodded his head. "Furious." A thin smile creased Harry's lips at the understanding.

Hermione knew at once what they were talking about, and her face turned ashen. "He'll retaliate! Harry, you know he will." Her face grew stern. "He's like a spoiled child who can't get his way. He'll throw a bloody tantrum, and people are going to die!" Her words were a bit loud, and turned the heads of some hungry passersby. Ron pulled her aside, and Harry followed. They looked very conspiratorial, huddled by one of the statues at the Great Hall's entrance.

"Okay," Ron started, "he's going to strike. But, as always, the question is where and when?" Both he and Hermione looked at Harry as if he might have the answer.

"Don't look at me," he shrugged again, sending up another billowing cloud of steam from his ears. "I might just have allergies."

"You don't suppose..." Hermione started holding her hand to her chin and squeezing her eyes till they looked like she was in pain. Ron

rolled his eyes, waiting for what was next. It was Hermione's dramatic pause for someone to offer an idea so she could say no and correct them. Ron stopped biting, long ago. "Could it be the Magpies?"

"What?" Ron scoffed.

"Well, I mean, it's odd enough that you're both invited to tryout for a professional team..."

"What?" Ron's pitch ran higher.

"... and now only two days before you're supposed to leave Hogwarts, Harry's scar starts hurting again."

"It's not my scar..." Harry corrected, "not really." The problem was he didn't know what it was. The mark on Harry's forehead that had linked Voldemort to Harry had been washed away, and with it the darkness that seeped into Harry's soul, but there still seemed to be a connection, however faint, with all that was good in Tom Riddle. Gone was the piercing pain in his forehead, and in its place was a dull ache that ran throughout his body in a slow wave. It made him feel that if he could just sleep for a day, he'd be better. Harry sighed, maybe he was just sick.

"Why is it odd," Ron continued, "that the best Seeker, and the best Keeper I might add, Hogwarts has seen in decades happen to attract professional attention?"

"Decades?" challenged Hermione, now taking a turn to roll her own eyes. Harry sighed, and started for lunch. He was hungry, and although Dumbledore had given his permission for the two to travel with appropriate guards, Hermione had a point. Suddenly, it didn't seem like such a great idea, but there was no stopping Ron, and because of that, there would be no stopping Harry either.

Ron and Hermione were still bickering at the entrance, when he sat down for lunch. They had moved off subject to proper studying habits... a topic Harry had come to learn never ended happily. He tried to eat quickly before he found himself caught in the middle again. It reminded him of the fights that Grigor and Soseh had over the

summer. The memories immediately turned his thoughts to Gabriella, and his heart began to sink a bit. He had hoped it would be easier this term, using the mirrors to communicate, but it was only that much worse saying goodbye. It was clear, to Harry at least, that Gabriella was unhappy with what was happening at home, and there was nothing Harry could do about it. He felt helpless.

“Are you going to eat your dessert?”

Harry awoke from his daydream to find Neville sitting across the table from him. Harry looked over to the entrance, and saw both Hermione and Ron storming in.

“Er... no,” Harry sputtered quickly. “You eat it. I need to go.” Harry sat up and started for the exit.

“Harry!” both Hermione and Ron shouted in unison.

“Sorry guys!” Harry held out his hands apologetically in a wide gesture. “I’m late for an appointment.” They both looked a little put out, but that was better than the alternative.

It wasn’t long before Harry was in the boys’ dormitory getting ready for Intermediate Apparation with Professor Flitwick. This term, they would attempt to apparate on their own, if only across the street, trying to avoid re-appearing with their feet under the ground. The steam now only fizzled from his ears. He was slipping his wand away, when another wave of nausea passed quickly over his body, and then disappeared. It was something akin to having a ghost pass through you, only much deeper, and much colder. The feeling that remained was one of anticipation. He leaned against his bedpost regaining his composure. Blinking his eyes, he glanced up at the portrait Soseh had painted, and noticed another change in the oils. While the people in magical portraits moved, this painting was very much the Muggle type with one exception... it changed. At least that’s what Harry was coming to realize. It reflected the way things were in the present. The portrait had corrected itself and vanished away the scar on Harry’s forehead. It had displayed the new earrings they now both wore since Christmas. Now it had transformed again. In the distance, beyond and behind the figure of Gabriella was a shadow, or puff of smoke. It

didn't make sense, and it seemed quiet out of place... unnatural. He began to worry that something was wrong. He reached over and tapped his invisible statue with his hand. He took solace in knowing that the look the two gave each other in the portrait was one of love, but he couldn't help see a greater sadness in Gabriella's expression.

He worried as he laced his trainers. He worried as he headed for class. He worried all day long, fretting at every opportunity. He consistently failed the wand movements in Apparation and lost five house points from Professor Flitwick. The first time that had happened in years.

That night, an hour before curfew, he sped the entire way to the owlery to speak with Gabriella. Over the last few weeks, Harry had been showing her different parts of the castle every time they used the mirrors to communicate. She was particularly impressed with the observatory, and with Firenze's inside-outdoor classroom.

"Papa, would love to teach there," she said longingly, and then her face broke into a deepening sadness.

Unfortunately, her father had been home less and less. His appearance and demeanor were deteriorating upon each return, and as it did, her desire to tell him the truth about what she had done in retribution for her brother's death waned. Duncan and Todd had taken to making regular visits, and perhaps the most enjoyable thing for Harry was the absence of any jealousy in his heart. He loved her, she loved him, their portrait was proof of that, and that was enough.

With Hedwig perched on his shoulder, he called her through his father's mirror. She was, as always, beautiful. Her hair was worn loosely about her shoulders, as she sat by her bedroom window. He could see past, across the street, to his own bedroom window. To some this might bring a pang of homesickness; to Harry it was just another window. His eyes gazed into hers and he saw tears.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

Gabriella bit her lower lip trying not to cry, but the tears welled up and flowed freely down her cheeks. Her breaths were quick, jerking and shallow, and she was having trouble gather herself together.

“Gabriella, what’s wrong?” Harry pleaded. “Is it the Ministry? That’s over with now.” He had never seen her so upset, not even after Emma’s death. He wanted to apparate right now... to be at her side, to hold her. He could feel the frustration building within, but he took a steadying breath and asked again as calmly as he could, “It’s okay, baby. Just tell me.”

“I... I told him,” she sniffed. “I told him everything.” There was a long pause. He had urged her to tell Grigor what had happened after her brother Antreas’ death, and he knew it would be difficult, but if her father’s love was strong...

“And?” he asked with caution.

“He’s gone, Harry. He’s gone!” she cried out, and burst into tears hanging her head.

“But he’s left before,” Harry offered truthfully. “He’ll be back.”

She cried for a moment longer, and then suddenly stopped, wiped her face, and slowly raised her head to look directly at Harry through the mirror. Her eyes were black stones, cold and intense. It was a look of courage and resolve that he had often seen, but now, like this... a cold shiver slithered up Harry’s spine. “What happened, Gabriella?”

“It was after dinner,” she began. Her voice was slow, steady, and uncharacteristically distant, almost detached. Her expression was frozen into a death masque that felt no pain. Harry had seen only flashes of this part of Gabriella before, but he knew all too well of the results... sixteen murdered in Lebanon for their hand in the torture and killing of her brother.

“It was after dinner, and for the first time in a long time Papa chose to smoke a cigar in the living room, and read the paper. I finished helping Mama with the dishes, when she said she was tired and

wanted to lie down. I can't remember when the last time Papa and I spent more than five minutes alone together. 'Now or never,' I thought, and I took a seat on the couch across from him. He looked over his newspaper and smiled. I wonder if he'll ever smile at me again." Her eyes wandered up and over the mirror, to where... Harry could only imagine.

"And so I told him. I told him that I had learned what had happened to Antreas at Al Bsahri. I told him of the great gathering of sixteen at the altar. I never learned the reason for the ritual, but I had learned the result. They had killed Antreas and the poor old woman. And then... and then I told him of the Headmaster, of how... of how he paid with his own life at my hands." She stopped, staring blankly past, or through Harry, as if she were looking back once again at the greatest horror of her life.

Now more than ever Harry wanted to be at Gabriella's side. It was clear she needed him there, but his only connection was through this mirror. At least it was better than owl, he thought, looking about the collection of birds flying around and overhead. Hedwig, tired of waiting to be summoned, flew down and lit on Harry's shoulder. The sight broke Gabriella's trance of silence, and for a brief instant she smiled as Hedwig pecked in annoyance at Harry's ear.

"She's bored," said Harry, offering her a small treat from his pocket. "Since we have the mirrors, her only chance to fly is when I write to Fred and George, and that's not far at all.

"I think she's getting fat," scolded Gabriella. Hedwig hooted, and puffed out her feathers, but the effect was not a handsome one.

"Would you like her to come for a visit?" Harry asked. "I know she'd love to see you again." Gabriella began to smile, but then her face fell.

"I don't know, Harry," she whispered.

"I guess... I guess your father was pretty mad?" asked Harry. "He stormed off then?"

Gabriella waited for a moment and then shook her head no. The tears began to well up again, and her look was one of confusion. "No," she rasped, "not angry... I don't know... sad, maybe... disappointed." She drew in a deep breath and finished her story. "After I told him what I'd done, he folded his newspaper and placed it at the side of his chair. He crushed out his cigar, and set it in the ashtray. He came over to me and held me in his arms. I began to cry." She cursed, wiping her face. "I never cry in front of my father." Gabriella took the mirror in both her hands, and swung it around. The motion made Harry a bit dizzy. She set the mirror on her night table, and lay down on her bed looking up at the sky. Then, chewing at the edge of one of her nails, her voice took on the tone of her father. "He said he was sorry. He said he was a fool, and had ruined everything, had lost his children, but that he would fix that. He said that he had the key to return all that he lost. He said... he said... 'Gabriella, she won't get away, I promise you. Antreas will return.'"

She rolled over onto her elbows and looked into the mirror. "Harry, it doesn't make sense. He told me to watch after Mama and that one day I would understand. He told me he loved me, and always would, and then... he disappeared." She paused, looking into Harry's eyes. Black locked with green, they both wanted the same thing very much. "He left with a puff of smoke," she said, weakly trying to smile. "He used to perform magic shows for Antreas and me when we were children. I think it may have been his last true happy memory."

"He'll come back, Gabriella. I know he will."

She shook her head and rolled over onto her back. "Mama woke up about an hour ago. I think he's been controlling her mind all this time. She knows something, but can't or won't bring herself to say. All she did was hold me, and tell me that Papa, as he is, would never return to this house, and Mama is never wrong."

Harry didn't know what to say, or think. He had half believed Grigor was in league with Voldemort, but now he just wasn't sure. Still, what kind of father would abandon his family? "I'm sorry, Gabriella. I didn't think..."

“Shhhhhh,” she hushed, holding a finger to her lips. “I’m the only one that’s sorry. I should have told him straight away, and maybe none of this would have happened.”

“But then we might never have met, and my life would be... I don’t know... empty without you. I wish you were here,” he whispered. And she nodded, wiping at her face again. “Listen,” he said brightly. “I know we can’t be together next week for Valentine’s and all, but I thought I’d send you a little something.” He held up a small package in the mirror. “It’s just chocolate from Honeydukes, but...”

“It’s wonderful, Harry,” said Gabriella warmly. “Thank you.” They paused looking at each other, as they always did when it was time to say goodbye, only this time there was a sense of unease.

“You’ll keep me informed and tell me how your mother’s doing? Ron and I will be flying with the Magpies tomorrow night, but we can talk Sunday, okay?”

“Oh, that’s right,” she said with embarrassment, covering her mouth with her hand. “And all I’ve been doing is prattling on about...”

“Family’s more important, Gabriella. It’s always more important.” Again they held each other’s eyes, and she nodded.

After Harry wrapped the mirror and slipped it back into his cloak, he tied the small box to Hedwig’s leg and sent her away into the clear, dark night. There was no moon, only the intense flickering of stars in the heavens. On such a night, he cursed as his mind wandered to where it must. If Grigor was a Death Eater, and he had left to finish whatever he had started, then something would surely happen soon. He watched as Hedwig’s white feathers were swallowed by the darkness, and then turned to leave. It was time to speak with Dumbledore about the Magpies.

Chapter 59 - A New Game

"Portkey? Why do we have to travel by portkey?" Harry hated the feeling of his intestines being pulled inside out, and if he was to demonstrate his skills as a flyer, he didn't need the extra disorientation that flying by portkey would bring. "Can't we just fly?" Everyone looked at him askew, as though he'd just released a rather loud belch. "I mean, it's only fifty miles and..."

"I know your broom will get you there in fifteen minutes just as warm as a pigeon, but the rest of us aren't so fortunate," scolded Tonks. "We travel together, and we travel by portkey." She had been listening to Harry's complaint over and over for the last half hour, and this time placed added finality to her words.

It was a small group: two flyers (Harry and Ron), two guards (Tonks and Shacklebolt), and two guests. Ron had selected Hermione. Harry briefly considered inviting Draco as a sort of peace offering, but later reconsidered and instead chose Cho. She had been spending a lot more time with Anthony Goldstein lately, and Harry took some delight in knowing that Anthony would have to sit back and watch as Harry took Cho to see professional Quidditch players the Saturday before Valentine's. Of the six, only Hermione seemed to be nervous. She sidestepped over to Harry.

"Do you think it's wise that Tonks..."

"Hermione," he said, sharply cutting her off. "I think you'll find Tonks more than capable." Harry had always been defensive of Tonks, but over the last hour as they prepared to go he was exceptionally acerbic.

"Very well, everyone," Shacklebolt said in a firm voice. "Just as... er, Tonks said, we travel together. Nobody leaves my sight when we arrive. That includes you as well, Professor." He pointed at Tonks.

"Understood," she nodded. "Birds of a feather..."

"Then on three..."

A moment later they were all being yanked by their navels, and soon found themselves landing in the dressing room of the Montrose Magpies. Corry Pembroke, a star Chaser for the Magpies, was lacing up his flying boots. He was dressed in black and white Quidditch robes, and as they arrived he looked up for but a moment flashing dark green eyes and a dark moustache but no smile and then returned to his laces. Standing by the lockers was Terrence Tellman wearing a broad, perhaps Cheshire-like, smile.

"That's him," Tonks whispered in Harry's ear. Harry nodded and took Cho by the arm.

"Welcome! Welcome!" Tellman called to the group as they each regained their balance.

"Cho I'd like you to meet Terrence Tellman," said Harry. "One of greatest Seekers of all time, next to you of course."

"You play?" Tellman asked graciously. Cho nodded, turning four shades of red and suddenly unable to find words in her mouth. The man was larger than life, literally. Towering over her he said, "Then perhaps you'd like to be the one to take this back to Hogwarts." He handed her a black Snitch, perhaps made of ebony, with the names of the players inscribed in small white script.

"Fantastic!" she breathed, turning about to show the others.

"Brilliant," Tonks said, admiring the ebon orb.

"Harry, Ron, are you ready?" Tellman asked.

"Let's go!" beamed Ron. Harry was a bit more hesitant, but circled to follow Ron. As he did so, he walked straight into Pembroke who was hunched over tying the final knot. Harry flipped over Pembroke's back, knocked over his broom with a clatter, but somehow managed to land on his feet.

"Quick moves, Harry, if a bit clumsy," Tellman grinned, as Pembroke took to his feet.

"I'm used to it," Harry muttered, following the group to the exit.

They opened the doors to a brilliant green pitch. The stadium was enormous, with stands twice as high as those at Hogwarts. Tonks immediately recognized Aladair Maddok who was flying about the rings at the south end of the pitch, tossing one Quaffle after another into the air only to bat them into the rings with his broom. A large, burly man flew over to meet the group. His hair was bright red, and he wore something akin to referee robes. As he drew near, Ron leaned over to Harry.

"It's Bennegin," he whispered, "the Magpie's coach." Harry nodded, but appeared to be more concerned with the skies above the pitch than the large man swooping in. Hermione, to the contrary was focused completely on Tonks.

"These the two, Tellman?" he asked with a big, booming voice. His face was red, worn from years of flying in the open air. His eyes were a brilliant blue, and while at a distance he was certainly intimidating, up close, his wide white smile made him appear more like a great uncle. This was going to be fun.

"Yes, sir," Tellman said smartly. "Fresh in from Hogwarts." Tellman introduced Harry and Ron, as well as their guests and the two bodyguards. His introductions were more stiff than they needed to be, and his eyes kept darting over to Pembroke now mounting his broom.

"Well," Coach Bennegin, began, "let's start with some simple Quaffle passes. I know you're a Seeker, Harry, but I'd like to see your skill on that Caduceus of yours. We're still flying modified Firebolts, and I've heard mixed reactions from some of the other players in the league. Fast, but not agile." Harry nodded, looking nervously at Tonks, who gave him an encouraging smile.

"You'll be fine, Harry," she said. "Just have fun."

Ron, on the other hand was clearly distraught. His broom was agile enough to guard the rings, but it had no speed to compete with what was flying out on the pitch. Coach Bennegin picked up on the emotion instantly, and was already a step ahead. "Weasley," he said,

“you’ll stay at Keeper. That’s your strength and that’s where the team is the thinnest. I think at this point, as long as you don’t fall off your broom, you’re better than the last three blokes we’ve had through.”

It wasn’t long before they were airborne. Cho and Hermione joined Shacklebolt in the box seats at center pitch, while Tonks flew watch high above the others. Hermione didn’t understand this since Shacklebolt was the better flyer. She tried to have the two switch roles, but they were having none of it, particularly Tonks.

As play started, it was evident that Ron was having the time of his life. He had blocked the first four attempts on goal. One was a nasty pass from Tellman to Maddock, who tried striking the Quaffle with his broom as he had practiced earlier. While Ron stopped the score, the speed of the Quaffle knocked him backwards into the post of the left ring. It took him a moment to clear his head, but at least he stayed on his broom.

“Well done, Weasley!” Coach Bennegin yelled out from just above. He was flying back and forth across the pitch following everywhere the Quaffle went. “Absolutely brilliant! You were right, Tellman! He’s a mind reader!”

The sky was azure blue, the wind was still, and the afternoon sun put just enough warmth in the air that Harry garnered no advantage from the elements with his Caduceus. Unfortunately, he was not faring nearly as well as Ron. His play was conservative and stilted, as if it had been years since he had even touched a Quaffle.

“Come on, Harry!” Ron yelled, trying to cheer Harry on as he darted for a loose Quaffle after an errant pass from Tellman to Maddock. The broom responded, but Harry’s timing was off, overshooting the falling ball by some three feet. Bennegin, while often yelling about the poor flying of his own players, never said a word about Harry’s. Even Hermione could tell it was the worst flying she’d seen on a Quidditch pitch except perhaps for last year’s Gryffindor team under Umbridge’s rule.

An hour passed, and Bennegin raised his wand, which emitted a high-pitched squeal. The team flew down to the center of the pitch to

take a break. Cho, Hermione, and Shacklebolt were invited to meet the team and get autographs. Cho was clearly the most eager, although Shacklebolt even had a thin grin at the corners of his mouth as Maddock took a quill and signed his name on a portrait they had of the team.

Tellman disappeared for a moment and returned with one of the team assistants. They were levitating a large cooler of lemonade and some snacks. Hermione was wary of the offer, but as Tellman took the first bite followed by Shacklebolt without any ill effects, she soon acquiesced. After a few moments of light conversation, and some coaching points given by Bennegin, everyone had snacked except Harry and Tonks.

“Go ahead, Harry,” Tellman offered a cup of lemonade. “You’re having a rough go of it out there today. Bit nervous?” Harry nodded his head as he stepped toward Tellman. As he did so he moved his broom from his right hand to his left, and reached for the cup just as his broom slipped between his feet and tripped him. He lunged forward splashing the cup all over Tellman’s robes and falling into the table of food, causing it to crash to the ground. The cooler flipped on its side spraying more lemonade over Tellman’s boots and saturating the ground. The Magpie professional tried to step backwards, but slipped in the sour mud and fell to the ground on his hind side. His expression was one of fury. Instantly, he had his wand to the ready.

Shacklebolt was the first to react. He had his wand out before Tellman, but it was Pembroke, standing to the rear by the stands that cast the first spell.

“Resurrectio Dormis!” he called. The effect was instantaneous. Everyone who had sipped the lemonade reached for their heads, rolled their eyes upward, and fell to the ground. Everyone, that is, except Pembroke and Tellman. Harry was trying to get to his feet and gather his wand from beneath his flying robes as he heard Tonks run past him.

“No!” she yelled, readying her wand at Pembroke. She sent a blazing stunner that struck him squarely in the chest and threw him backward some ten feet against the stone pillars of the stands. A bolt of green

light flew just past her head. It came from the right, and as she turned she caught sight of the team assistant. There was another behind him, and in a flash she had expelled both their wands. She spun to take on Tellman, but stopped short. The tall wizard had gathered Harry in his arms and held his wand directly at his temple.

“He said he wanted him alive,” the oversized wizard whispered with an almost mechanical voice. “But dead’s good too.” A surreal smile split his lips and showed a toothy grin as if the thought of murder was amusing in some way. “Drop your wand and you can both live.” Tellman’s large left hand reached about Harry’s throat and he began to lift him like a rag doll. Harry gurgled as the wizard squeezed tighter. “Well?” he queried in a high pitched note. The other two had now gathered their wands. The first fired a stunner, but Tonks deflected it with ease sending it back in their general direction and forcing them to take cover. It was three-on-one, and they wisely hesitated to take on the Auror again.

Tonks’ eyes grew narrow, and a thin smile curled at the corners of her lips. It was a look of pure satisfaction. For an instant Tellman looked confused. It was he who was in control. She was clearly outnumbered, but the look on the young woman before him registered something quite different.

“I think, Harry,” she said in a deepening tone, “your time has come. Don’t you?”

And then something more strange happened. Harry, his feet now fully off the ground, nodded, and then with a snap disappeared. Tellman found himself gripping thin air, for an instant he searched about to see where the boy had gotten to.

“He couldn’t have gone far,” he sputtered, now wand to wand with Tonks, his fingers trembling having lost his prey. “They said he couldn’t apparate, they said...”

“Oh, but he can’t,” Tonks smiled, sending off a stunner toward the two assistants peaking about the corner. One ducked in time, the other was not so fortunate. With a twist, her wand was back on Tellman who was still scanning the pitch and stands for Harry.

"He's got to be here!" he yelled, now becoming nervous.

"He is here," Tonks said, almost laughing.

A moment later there was a tremendous red flash, and then the air began to fill with the sound of popping popcorn. Wizard after wizard was apparating onto the pitch and above it on brooms. In the span of ten seconds, over two-dozen wizards had appeared and more were still snapping in.

"Where were you taking him?" Tonks called out to Tellman. The large wizard began to tremble with fear. "Was it by portkey?" His eyes left the sky and settled on Tonks. Slowly he shook his head, his eyes wide. "By broom?" Silence. Wizards were running toward them, but Tonks held her wand steady. "Damn it, tell me." A blast of red light lit up the stones from where the last assistant stood. He flew out screaming, his clothes on fire. Someone had attacked him from behind. Tonks extinguished the flames, as he fell to the ground unconscious. Tellman waved his wand, but nothing happened. "You can't apparate. Dumbledore's here by now and he's secured the area. He's a Legilimens, so you best speak now and avoid the pain." As if trying to fight the urge, Tellman's hand began to shake violently, and then the words came in little more than a whisper that pierced his lips.

"Resurrectio Mortis."

He doubled over, screaming in agony, and then fell limp into the grass. No sooner had he slumped to the sod, Harry appeared from behind the stands where the assistants were hiding. Two steps behind him was Professor Dumbledore. The professor quickly called to Tonks.

"Are you alright, child?" he asked. He was at her side in a flash and put his hands on both her shoulders, looking intently into her eyes.

"Very well, sir" she replied. "But Tellman... I think he's dead."

Professor Dumbledore reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small green ball not much bigger than a marble. No sooner had he

whispered something, then the red glow faded from over the stadium and Madame Pomfrey appeared.

"Is it Harry?" she asked with concern.

"I'm afraid, Poppy," the blue-eyed wizard said with a grim look, "the young man there has poisoned himself. It might not be too late, if you hurry."

"Wait!" Tonks exclaimed, as if suddenly remembering something forgotten. "Let me. I can..." But Professor Dumbledore grabbed her by the arm.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that... under the circumstances," he said in a very controlled and stern voice. "You've spent far too much energy already, I'm afraid. And I know you haven't prepared." Dumbledore looked closely into Tonks' eyes. "Am I not correct?" Tonks dropped her head. Madame Pomfrey bent low to Tellman and the pair vanished. The other co-conspirators were rounded up by the rather large collection of wizards, a number of whom were Aurors, and brought before Dumbledore. He looked briefly into each of their eyes, and shook his head. "They know nothing. It would be best to take them to St. Mungo's, and let Arthur try his magic."

"What about..." Tonks began, pointing at Shackbolt and the others still fallen on the grass.

"Patience," Dumbledore interrupted. They are asleep, that is all, and we have one more thing to take care of I believe before they wake. Follow me." Harry and Tonks followed Professor Dumbledore behind the black and white stands of the Magpie stadium. They were alone, but still he cast a shield charm that enveloped the threesome in a large cloak of invisibility. He looked at Tonks. "Harry, if you wouldn't mind returning."

She removed her shoes, and unbuttoned her robe. Beneath the invisibility shield, Tonks began to grow taller and fuller. Her short hair began to grow longer and darken. A moment later, where once stood Tonks now stood Harry, looking at his twin.

“And now you Nymphadora,” the old man smiled at the other Harry.

The transformation was much quicker, and ended with Tonks standing in baggy Quidditch robes with the addition of flaming bright red hair.

“Is it too much?” she smiled pulling at her locks, and they all laughed.

“A fine plan, if I do say so myself, Harry,” Dumbledore smiled. “Although I now know who needs some flying lessons,” he chided Tonks with a grin. The two swapped clothes, and emerged from behind the stands just as their friends were being brought back to consciousness.

“Harry!” Cho called, nearly pushing the healer attending to her over, and rushing to Harry’s side. “They said you were okay, but...” She squeezed him tight. “What happened?”

“Later,” he whispered, hugging her back.

“Well,” said Bennegin in a very apologetic voice as he walked toward Professor Dumbledore and held out his hand. “That’s the last time I question the Headmaster of Hogwarts.” Dumbledore took his hand with a gracious smile, and the two shook firmly.

“I can understand your hesitation, Bernard,” said Dumbledore. “Tellman has always been one to wear the colors on his sleeve. Still, the Imperius Curse can control the most loyal minds, even to death.” Bennegin sighed, and shook his head. The Magpie coached looked at Harry, as if he was trying to read the boy’s mind.

“So, is this...” he asked.

“Bernard Bennegin,” Dumbledore said in a grand formal voice. “Let me introduce you to Harry Potter. THE Harry Potter.”

“Pleasure to meet you, sir,” Harry said kindly, and the two shook.

“But you met him over an hour ago!” said Ron, blinking his eyes as he stood.

Bennegin just smiled at the redhead. "Listen, lad," he said putting his arm about Harry's shoulder, and slowly walking a few steps away. "Perhaps this summer, you might find some time to try this again. Only no stunners, and nobody has to die. What do you say?"

"And Ron?" Harry asked quietly.

"If he keeps up like he has, he'll write his own ticket to whatever team he wants to join. But..." he paused.

"Yes?"

"Well, I promised his dad that I'd wait until after he graduates." He paused shaking his head. "I think the Minister's wife has been in touch with every team in the British and Irish League." They both turned back to the group where each was sharing their recent experience with Dumbledore. "You know, Ron," Bennegin said in a booming voice. "You're as brilliant as your brothers. I offered them both positions as Beaters last year, when I heard they'd flown the coop. They turned me down flat to start that business of theirs, and now... well, now they make more money than even Maddock with all his endorsements combined."

"Harry, what happened?" asked Hermione, walking over and rubbing her face.

"I'm afraid," Professor Dumbledore said, "further questions will have to wait until our return." He scanned about and settled on the cooler of lemonade now emptied onto the grass. "Portus," he whispered, and levitated the orange cylinder into the air. "Nymphadora, I understand you and Shacklebolt will be reporting to the Minister?"

"Yes, sir," she said. "I'll return to Hogwarts later this evening. Kingsley will..."

"Kingsley will be taking a well deserved nap at home tonight," Shacklebolt smiled.

"Very well," Dumbledore nodded. "Everyone, please gather around."

Harry waved goodbye at Bennegin just as he was yanked back to Hogwarts.

Together they walked up the stone steps to the front door of Hogwarts castle and entered. It was strange. Everything was as they had left it. Clearly, no word had gotten out of what had happened. Cho kissed Harry on the cheek as they returned to their respective common rooms to prepare for dinner. "I can't believe I slept through the whole fight." She sighed. "I'm glad you're okay," she said with concern, and then she smiled. "Gabriella would kill me if I let you die." She started down the hall and turned back one last time. "It's a shame they didn't want you on the team, but your flying was bloody awful today."

Harry just nodded and shrugged his shoulders. He started on down the corridor to Gryffindor tower with Ron and Hermione. The two young lovers had taken to open signs of affection now. Ron's arm was about Hermione's shoulders and he held her close.

"I wouldn't have let them hurt you, Hermione," the redhead said, puffing out his chest.

"Ron!" she retorted pinching his side. "You were asleep too. You wouldn't have been able to save a fly."

"Well, maybe the ones he was sleeping on," Harry smiled. Ron just sulked. It was only a few more steps before it began.

"Harry," Hermione said with a questioning tone, "you still haven't said how..."

"Well, it was Tellman and his lackeys against me and Tonks, only Tellman had me by the neck... his wand pointed at my skull. I figured I was dead, but Tonks saved my life."

The idea of Tonks working against the motives of Voldemort was clearly disconcerting to Hermione. She'd been down this path with Harry already, trying to get him to realize that Tonks was a threat. But with Harry's new information, her position had only grown weaker.

Unfortunately, it had run contrary to everything she had observed, and heard, and that included things that Harry knew nothing of.

“Well,” she began begrudgingly, “I think that’s great. She’s certainly a talented Auror taking on three or four wizards while you were at the death-point of one of them.” There was a moment of silence after Ron uh-hummed in agreement. They were at the portrait of the Fat Lady. “You don’t suppose she was just hoping that he’d ‘pull-the-trigger’ do you?”

“SHE SAVED MY LIFE.” Harry said slowly, deliberately, and loud enough that when they entered the common room, everyone was looking their way.

“Well?” Ginny yelled, seeing them enter. “What happened? Ron? Are you a professional?” Her face was beaming in anticipation, but she could tell at once that Ron was not thoroughly pleased with the day’s outcome. The youngest Weasley, however, was wise enough to understand Harry’s expression, which had quickly moved from exasperation with Hermione to a sense of achievement.

Indeed, Harry had accomplished great feats today. Working with Dumbledore, he and Tonks had fended off an early attempt of Voldemort to strike back, even though Dumbledore had questioned if it was really Voldemort’s idea at all, or perhaps the whim of a misguided loyalist. Still, they had gone in prepared, and they had won the battle. This time it was Harry providing the surprise, and there was something deeply satisfying in knowing he had been a step ahead.

The second most enjoyable aspect of the day’s events was that Tonks had deftly come to Harry’s aid and helped to save the day. Even Dumbledore questioned the wisdom in Harry’s idea to depend on Tonks, but the only way to pull the switch off was to have both Harry and Tonks use their skills, although Harry wished they could have practiced on the Caduceus more. It was his fervent hope that this demonstration of loyalty would keep Hermione off Harry’s shoulder every time he went to speak with Tonks. Harry was convinced that this was why she had stopped talking about rescuing

Sirius. With Hermione a few steps back, he and Tonks might have room to solve the puzzle.

Finally, there was some pleasure in knowing that his good friend, Ron, was well on his way to playing professional Quidditch. He wondered if he should tell him, but chose instead to whisper it to Ginny. She immediately began to squeal, and Harry's attempts to calm her down failed miserably.

"You swore you wouldn't tell, right?" Harry asked, confirming the oath she had just taken. Ginny looked as if she'd just been hexed with itching powder, or a fire curse the way she was waving her hands and hopping on her feet. Finally, she nodded in agreement boring a slanted eye right at Ron.

"What?" he asked. "What did he say?" He turned to his friend. "What is it, Harry? What did you tell her?"

Hermione, whose instincts were far more in tune than Ron, wore a thin smile. "Go get cleaned up for dinner," she said pushing him up the stairs. Ginny was still trying to contain herself.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe it."

"Believe what?" Ron yelled.

Harry grabbed Ron by the arm and pulled him on up the stairs. "Come on, Ron," he said, "Some things are best left to personal discovery."

"Then it's about me?"

"Yes. Yes," said Harry with a smile. "It's all about you."

They climbed the stairs and Ron pulled off his shirt giving it a deep sniff. "I think I'll skip the shower and just rest," he said, flopping down on his bed.

"Okay. I'll just be a minute," Harry said, grabbing a towel.

As he stood in the shower, letting the warm water run down his lengthening hair, his own mind questioned Tonks' motives. Much like Soseh, Hermione was rarely wrong. If Tonks had been under Voldemort's Imperius curse, surely she would have taken action to capture him today. He had agreed with Dumbledore to plan for that contingency, but fortunately never had to implement the plan. Perhaps Voldemort's loss of energy had weakened the spell. Perhaps there was no conspiracy. Perhaps she was working for someone else. But like the water swirling down into the drain, his mind was once again drawn toward the solution of the puzzle.

If only he could figure out what the other ingredient was. They could save Sirius, and be done with it. He let the shower spray him fully in the face one last time, and with a simple incantation turned it off. The water dripped from the shower head and plinked onto the floor with a high pitched tone that echoed against the stone walls. The shower room was quiet except for the small drip-drip-drip that, in the silence, grew louder with every drop.

He was drying off as Lloyd Wade, Neville Longbottom, and a third year Harry didn't know very well, all entered the showers and turned them on at the same time. The sudden contrast in sounds was remarkable, and for some reason the roar of the water hurt Harry's ears. It had been so quiet, but this... this reminded him of...

Suddenly, Harry's hands began to tremble, and his pulse quickened with excitement. He had to lean against the wall to steady himself. He was feeling very light headed at the moment.

"Come on, Harry!" Ron called from the distance. "I'm getting hungry." Harry took a deep breath.

"Coming!" he yelled back down the corridor.

By the time they arrived for dinner, the story of the attack had spread through the school. Everyone was asking Harry what had happened, but he was more than happy that Ron was telling the tale, even though he'd slept through the whole thing. Harry's mind was elsewhere. It had left concern of Voldemort behind. It had floated far

a field from worrying about Gabriella. It had dismissed, outright, trepidation of the path forward.

Only Hermione noticed Harry's unusual preoccupation with his drink at dinner. He gazed intently at it, turning the liquid in his hand, examining every feature of the contents as if he'd discovered the Holy Grail in an ordinary glass of water.

Chapter 60 – Bad Timing

“I’m telling you I know what it is, Tonks,” Harry cried for the fourth time, but she continued to ignore him as she levitated the pillows back against the wall. It was the eve of Valentine’s Day, and Harry had called a DA meeting. It was the only way he could think to get Tonks alone. Lately, she had been chatting more and more with Firenze, and the few chances Harry had to speak with her over the weekend, she seemed to deliberately go the other way.

She adjusted the books on the shelves, and then slipped her wand away and started for the door. “A very good session, I believe, Harry,” she said with not much expression at all, and continued to leave.

“Why are you doing this?” he said to her back. She walked out into the hall. Harry was exasperated. “Then I want it back!” he said sharply. This caused her to halt her step. “I want the basin, and his blood. I’ll do it myself.”

“That’s not possible,” she replied without turning around.

“You started this, Tonks. Not me. I won’t give up now... now that I know...”

“You know nothing,” she sliced, turning back to face him. “Leave it alone, Harry.”

“He’s your family,” Harry pleaded. “Why won’t you...”

“I can’t,” she said, stepping closer. Her eyes dashed up and down the corridor, and then settled back on Harry. “The thing is...”

“Professor Tonks...” said a slinking voice appearing from nowhere. “Mr. Potter,” it sneered. Harry didn’t need to turn to know that Snape stood just behind him. Harry’s jaw clenched in anger. Not now!

“Professor Snape,” Tonks said with an overly professional tone. Harry remained silent. “We were just finishing with tonight’s DA meeting.”

"Yes... yes I know," Snape drawled. "Another perfectly good night wasted on such drivel, when the students should be studying. No doubt you'll be as ill-prepared for tomorrow's class as anyone, Potter. Although, morning classes seem hardly worthwhile since everyone will have their minds on Hogsmeade and their moronic romance plans. Valentines..." he breathed in a long low sigh of disgust.

"No, sir," Harry replied as he turned to see the Slytherin Head of House. He wondered if Snape ever... no, no he didn't wonder. "Er... yes, sir," Harry corrected, and Snape rolled his eyes in dramatic fashion, and waved the back of his hand at Harry as if shooing away a fly.

"Professor Tonks, if I might have a word," Snape asked, turning distinctly to push Harry out of the conversation. She glanced at Harry, and then back to Snape.

"Certainly, Professor. Harry we can continue our talk tomorrow. Do you have any moronic plans for Hogsmeade tomorrow afternoon?"

"Actually," said Harry, his eyes glaring, "I had my mind set on a trip to the Ministry... if only I had a..."

"Very funny, Potter," Snape cut in. "Good evening." He positioned himself squarely between Harry and Tonks, facing Tonks and then holding her lightly by the elbow and walking with her down the corridor and away from Harry who stood and watched as they turned the corner. He shook his head; what had changed?

He was halfway back to Gryffindor when he heard footsteps following behind. He turned to look, but only found an empty corridor, and so started on his way. A bit further, he heard them again, only this time he spun quickly and caught sight of a dark cloak ducking into an empty classroom. "Who's there?" Harry yelled, slipping his fingers about his wand. He had much preferred the tingling sensation he had before Christmas that signaled when an attack was imminent, but that sixth sense had long passed since his visit to the falls. "I know you're there. Come out!"

“Why don’t you step in?” a familiar voice drawled from within. Harry knew it was Malfoy, but why was he following him? He pulled his wand and held it at the ready as he approached the door. His overly cautious entrance only made the Slytherin laugh as Harry entered the classroom.

“Afraid you’ll be molested, Potter?” Malfoy sneered.

“What’s going on, Draco?” Harry asked, looking to see if there were others, but he found the room empty. In a flash, Malfoy pulled his wand, pointed it at Harry, and the door slammed behind him. Harry wasn’t sure why he made no attempt to shield for such a provocative motion. It was as if he was seeing the Malfoy of old... spry, quick, capable, and sickeningly snobbish. A smile creased Harry’s face. “Feeling better?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Malfoy smirked back. His gray eyes were clear, his skin pale but healthy, and his hair as coifed as ever. Nonetheless, Harry noticed a slight tremor in Malfoy’s wand hand, a lingering remnant of his addiction to the potions concocted by his father. “Tego,” he whispered, causing the walls to glow white.

“That damn house-elf is still following me. Pomfrey doesn’t know why you’re healed, and she’s convinced that my using potions may be an indication of my impending madness.” He slipped his wand away and hunched back in a chair behind the classroom desk. “If you ask me, and you should, I’m the only one sane around here. It’s the rest of them that are as mad as a chimaera.” His face twisted, as he looked into space. The result was not flattering, and reminded Harry of the Malfoy he’d seen in the dungeons.

“What is it, Draco?” Harry asked. “What do you want?” Malfoy’s eyes shifted and came to rest on Harry.

“So what are the student and the professor up to?”

“I don’t know what...”

“You know very bloody well what I’m talking about!” Malfoy snapped, sitting up straight in his chair.

"Where the hell do you get off, yelling at me?" Harry yelled back, striding up to the desk and glaring down at the blonde. "I don't need to..."

"She'll ruin everything!" Malfoy interrupted. He took to his feet and walked over to a window that looked out to the Quidditch pitch at the back of the castle. For a Malfoy, he was far more moody than normal.

"You're beginning to sound like Hermione," Harry said dismissively.

"Well, the mudblood... er, damn it, Harry, your friend is right. I heard Bellatrix talking about her over Christmas, about something she would bring to the Dark Lord. Snape... and now Tonks! He'll have control of the whole inner castle before too long. Don't trust her; don't trust any of them. If you do, it shifts the power to his favor, and we lose." Hearing these words, in such contrast to Malfoy's feelings at the beginning of the New Year, Harry couldn't help but feel he was being manipulated.

"Don't tell me the Death Eater's son has had a change of heart," said Harry, stepping close to Malfoy. They were toe-to-toe by the window and Harry leaned closer. "Because you... don't... have... one." Harry could smell the cologne on Malfoy's face. It was expensive -- but clean hair and fresh clothes didn't mean a drug addict wasn't a drug addict. How long would it be before Malfoy relapsed? The one person Harry couldn't trust stood right before him. Still, the instant the words left Harry's mouth, he wanted them back. Malfoy needed support and Harry could tell by the look in his eyes that he'd been hurt. Perhaps last year, Harry would have taken satisfaction in that fact, but not now, not anymore. Had he been wrong? If he was, it was too late to take it back. Malfoy turned sharply away from the window.

"Draco, you said this war was about power," Harry said quietly, "and maybe it is, but I won't try to win the battle that way... I can't, it's just not in me. I have to try another way."

"And what way is that, Harry? Love?" Malfoy's lips were thin and his eyes were fire. All year the two had gone round and round and still

found themselves back at the beginning. Malfoy was trembling with fury, but why?

"Is love so bad?" Harry asked softly.

"So, she'll be here, tomorrow, is that it? You're planning a little tryst?" The questions were sharp.

"Tonks?" Harry asked, confused.

"Gabriella," Malfoy said in an acerbically innocent tone. "It is Valentine's after all, and you two are... lovers, aren't you?" Harry remained silent, but his hands rounded into fists. Lately, Harry hadn't kept her much of a secret, but how did Malfoy know about Gabriella? And even if he did know, why would he care? The Slytherin pressed the advantage he knew he held. "Don't tell me she'll be staying home alone, with her sick mother," he said, placing his hand over his chest in a fake expression of concern. "That could be very dangerous... don't you think, Potter?"

In less than a second, Harry had Malfoy pinned to the floor, with one hand pulled back, ready to strike. "If you... if they lay one hand on her..." Harry now began to tremble in anger. "Tell me what you know!"

"What I know?" asked Malfoy, his expression somewhere between hurt and rage. "What I know is that you're making a giant mistake," he said, followed by a short burst of laughter, and then he spit in Harry's face. "Go to hell."

There was a rustling near the door. The house-elf had returned, hidden from view, but they both knew it was there. Harry pulled back to strike, then cursed under his breath. He dropped his hands about Malfoy's neck and bent low to his ear. "One hair, Malfoy, and I'll kill you," he whispered. He grabbed the corner of Malfoy's green cloak, wiped his face, and left.

He could hear Malfoy's laughter, as he walked down the corridor. The false mirth was seeped in sadness, but Harry took no note of it. He brooded, breathing heavily as he walked through the portrait of the

Fat Lady. He entered the Gryffindor common room to find Ron selling Weasley's Wonderful Passion Potions, much to Hermione's consternation.

"I can't believe you're a prefect, Ronald Weasley," she said in exasperation. "Do you even know if that stuff is safe?"

"Must be," Ron grinned as he took a Galleon from a fourth year. "It's still working on you isn't it?"

Hermione scowled and then her eyebrows curled up into a pensive glare.

"Oooh," said Ron, looking at the fire building in her eyes. "Maybe you should have some more."

"I'll tell you what I should do! I should..." she reached for her wand, but Harry held her arm as Ron started to bend over in laughter. "And you!" she cried turning to Harry.

"Me!" said Harry with a slight crack in his voice. "What have I done?"

"Mr. 'Oh, can't we all just be honest with each other'," she scoffed. "And what have you been doing all weekend? Slinking about the castle as if you were searching for the Philosopher's Stone. What's going on?"

"Nothing you want to hear about," he said, flopping down on an overstuffed chair.

"Two galleons!" Pavarti cried out. "That's robbery, Weasley!"

"He's a big guy," answered Ron. "You'll need at least a double dose."

"You're not going to use that poison on Greg, are you?" Hermione shot out, as she spun on Pavarti.

"Well, he's been a bit distant lately. I thought..."

“Did you think about talking to him?” Hermione cut in. “Maybe ask him about his feelings?”

Pavarti looked at Hermione and then at the small vial in Ron’s hand. “Well,” she said with a sigh, “it’s too much money for my blood anyway. I guess I can try to talk to him.” She shrugged her shoulders and walked away.

“You cost me a sale!” Ron yelled.

“I saved you from a massive beating from Greg Goyle,” Hermione retorted. In seconds they were at each other again, and Harry took the opportunity to slip up the stairs.

It was quiet and dimly lit in the boys’ dormitory. A few candles flickered yellow light against the wall. Harry glanced up at his picture of Gabriella. The smoke that was there days earlier, had vanished. There was something reassuring about seeing her hold his hand as they watched the setting sun together. “This summer,” he whispered to himself. He took off his pants and shirt and stepped to his bed. As he did every night, he reached out and touched the invisible ball of cinnabar hidden on his desk. He hadn’t really given much thought to using it since he’d returned.

He and Gabriella had agreed to use the mirrors tomorrow evening, but he desperately wanted to speak to her now. It was late, and she’d likely be there if he called for her. He wanted to tell her to be careful, to watch out for those wanting to kill her, to... to tell her everything she already knew. He sighed and fell onto his bed. She hated when he showed concern like that. Still, Harry wondered, why did Malfoy care?

“Damn,” he whispered to the air.

A burst of laughter shot through the dormitory door. Dean emerged with Ginny in his arms. She was fiddling with the collar on his shirt, when she noticed Harry on the bed.

Oh... Hi, Harry,” Ginny blushed. Harry was too tired to worry about being half-naked. His mind was elsewhere.

"Don't tell me you bought one of Ron's potions," Harry asked, dropping his head back onto his pillow.

"We don't need a stupid potion, Harry," answered Dean grinning. Ginny grinned back and they kissed. Harry listened to the slurping for a minute then sat back up.

"Er... should I leave?"

"Oh," Ginny blushed again. "No, Harry... no. I was just saying goodnight."

"Goodnight," Harry said flatly, dropping his head down again.

She kissed Dean once more and left down the stairs. Dean sat down on his own bed with a light sigh of pleasure. "She's perfect," he breathed.

"Uh, huh," Harry muttered.

"And Ron's been real cool about the whole thing... thanks to you."

"Uh, huh."

"She loves me... and I love her."

"Right."

"That's why I think tomorrow..."

Harry never heard the rest of Dean's thoughts. His own mind had wandered into a restless sleep.

The sun, hanging high in the blue sky was hot against the back of Harry's neck. He was flying over the falls, holding a very small cup in his hand. Just a little closer... but for some reason his broom would not move closer. No matter how he'd attempt to approach, a great wind would blow into his face, and try as he might the water of the

falls stayed just out of reach. He looked into the pool below, and saw Luna swimming in the water and looking up at him.

"Hi, Harry!" she called. "Have you been listening? They're just behind the veil. Come and see!" She popped up, and then dived down into the water. Harry pushed his broom to fly down, but the Caduceus would not respond. It just hung in mid-air as if stuck to a giant invisible spider web.

It suddenly grew too dark to see, and Hermione's voice echoed in his mind. "Would you ruin us all for Sirius, Harry?" And then another voice spoke out, "What would you give to bring back the loved ones you've lost?" Who was it? "Well, Harry? Harry!" He woke with a start. Ron stood over him in the morning light, poking him in the ribs.

"If you're late to class this morning," he warned grabbing a towel and heading to the showers, "you know you won't be able to go to Hogsmeade this afternoon."

"I'm not going," Harry muttered, and rolled back over in bed.

"Not going is not an option!" Ron yelled again.

"Yeah! Get up, yeh mopin' murtlap," cajoled Seamus, as he laced his trainers. "At least yeh got a girl, even if she ain't here."

"That's right, Harry," joined in Neville, who was staring into the mirror and having trouble negotiating the part in his hair. "You should be thankful for what you have."

"What are you talking about?" Harry sneered through his pillow. "You're going to Hogsmeade with Helen this afternoon. Pavarti told me you two had reserved the table by the window at Madam Puddifoot's. She was a bit miffed since she wanted the table for her and Greg."

"Well... er, you should be thankful you don't have to sit by a fire all afternoon and have arrows shot at your head." Harry had to smile, thinking back to last year with Cho. Neville had a point, perhaps it would be better just to stay at the castle today.

His smile stayed with him throughout the morning. Gabriella would be opening her gift this morning, and that made him smile more. Harry was unflappable, even in Snape's class. When asked for the thirty-four ingredients required to create a potion to protect against love potions, Harry listed them all and in order of preparation. The listing was so perfect that Snape hesitated thinking about awarding house points, but turned his back on Harry.

"Satisfactory," Snape drawled, spun on his heels and went across the dungeon to ask Anthony a question. Unfortunately for Anthony, he'd spent most of the morning drawing doodles of Cho. Although, it might not have mattered, Professor Snape's question was exceedingly complex, even Harry was confused by it. When all Anthony could offer up was a shrug Snape seemed to unload his pent up frustration with Harry.

"Mr. Goldstein," he scowled, "I would have thought you would know the difference between extract of ashwinder eggs and flesh of fluxweed. Pity, I expected better, twenty points from Ravenclaw."

"That's not fair!" Anthony cried out.

"No?" Snape drawled out in a long, low tone. Everyone behind Professor Snape tried to signal for Anthony to be quiet, even Cho was squeezing his leg, but he ignored them all.

"You're just bitter!" snapped Goldstein. "Potter answered your questions and, and you're taking it out on me!"

"I see," answered Snape in all too cool voice. "Perhaps you can explain it to me, during your detention this afternoon."

There was an audible groan about the room, most notably by Cho, who just slumped back in her chair.

"But... but..." Anthony stammered.

"Would you like to join me this evening as well? I would think you'd prefer to spend your evening preparing the festivities for your

Quidditch match tomorrow against Slytherin.” Anthony slumped, and said nothing. “Do you intend to spend your evening cleaning cauldrons with a bitter man?” Snape pressed.

“No, sir,” Anthony replied, resigned to his unjust punishment.

Professor Snape turned and glared at Harry with a half smile on his face, as if somehow this punishment of Anthony was hurting him in some way. But, as it turned out, the punishment played to Harry’s favor, at least he thought it had.

As everyone was departing to Hogsmeade, Cho caught Harry in the corridor near the library. He was carrying a load of books, including Ancient Runes of the World.

“Ancient Runes?” she asked with surprise. “You’re not taking Runes. What’s up with the text?”

“Er... Hermione asked me to return it for her. She and Ron are off to Hogsmeade.”

“What, aren’t you going?” she asked, with a tinge of surprise in her voice. “Ron said...”

“Yeah, I know,” interrupted Harry, shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t want to be a third wheel. Strange really, but...”

“Not go?” Cho exclaimed. “But...” she stopped herself, and immediately began to fidget with the strap of her shoulder pack. “Well, Anthony’s stuck here with Snape, why don’t you go to town with me?” Harry gave her an odd look. “To Hogsmeade, you know, as friends... that’s all. We could go to Honeydukes, or the bookshop, or... well, I’d like to visit Fred & George’s shop. You know... if you want... just as friends.”

Harry didn’t mean to, but he found himself blushing a bit. He looked down at his book on runes; he thought he knew the cipher code for the spinning dial on Black’s golden bowl, but he wanted to make sure. The books he was carrying shifted in his hands; he didn’t understand why his hands should suddenly become sweaty.

“S-Sure,” he said, shrugging his shoulders again, “I guess.”

An hour later, Cho and Harry were walking the main street of Hogsmeade, side by side, but not arm in arm. It seemed that they were surrounded by couples holding hands or kissing, and it was more difficult than usual to carry on a normal conversation. When they came out of Honeydukes, Tristan Pointsetter, a seventh year from Hufflepuff stopped Cho by the arm.

“I thought you were with Anthony... what was his name... Goldstein?” Tristan asked.

“Well... I mean... I guess,” Cho stumbled. “It’s not official or anything, at least, he hasn’t asked... you know.” A broad smile spread across Tristan’s face.

“Yeah, I know.” She winked. “Besides, Harry’s a better catch anyway, the way he handles his broomstick...” she trailed off dreamily, walking into Honeydukes. Cho looked up to the sky to check the time; the air was cool, but both she and Harry seemed a bit flushed.

“Er, Harry, why don’t we go check in on the twin’s new shop?” Cho suggested.

After their success on Diagon Alley, Fred and George took over an old, run down, two-story, Tudor directly on the main street in Hogsmeade. Being the closest building in town to the train tracks, it was often a flophouse for vagrant witches and wizards that would skirt the outside of town. Harry never really paid the building much attention, but now that the twins had established their newest Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes store, its grandeur was hard to miss. Now, completely remodeled and refurbished, it was the first stop for anyone coming to town by train, and the business had become a stiff competitor for both Honeydukes and Zonkos, combining the best of both shops into one.

When Cho and Harry came up to the storefront, they had to wait in line to get in. Couples were leaving the store with little red bubbles coming out of their ears in the shape of hearts. Harry wasn’t sure if he

should be disturbed by the whole idea, or happy that his investment was turning such a profit. He looked in through the new windows to see people laughing, and the sight warmed him inside against the afternoon chill. By the time the two made it inside, Harry was beaming; there was a positive energy here like nowhere else.

“Hey! Harry!” Fred called from the front of the store. “Get over here, we need a hand.” Harry and Cho made their way through the crowd and stepped behind the counter. Fred looked tired, there were dark lines under his eyes, and his skin appeared a bit gray. “Good to see you too, mate,” he said brightly, noting Harry’s concern. “Don’t worry, I have another week and I’m expecting a special delivery shortly,” he flashed a large smile. “Look, today everything in the store is two sickles, got it?” Harry nodded. “Good, start taking their money.” He slapped Harry on the back, and moved over to George who was demonstrating a new chew that forced the chewer to sing an extremely sappy love song. The girls were buying them by the dozens for their boyfriends. Harry took off his jacket and both he and Cho started selling Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes.

Nearly an hour passed when there was a sudden, shrill scream somewhere from the middle of the store; it was Marietta Edgecombe. Everyone turned to face the sound.

“There you are!” she yelled with excitement, looking passed Harry to Cho, who was busy gathering up more nougats and toffees. “Cho! Cho!” Marietta cried out again. Marietta pushed her way through the crowd to the front counter, grabbed Cho about the neck and hugged her so tightly, Harry thought Cho would faint. “You won’t believe it! You won’t believe it!”

“What?” Cho asked. “What’s the matter?”

“Les Bowers,” Marietta squeaked, “he’s sick.” Her face flashed a smile, then a look of concern, then a smile again.

“So?”

“Les... is... sick...” Marietta said again, very carefully. As was Cho, Harry was having trouble understanding why Les Bowers, the Ravenclaw Seeker, being sick had anything to do....”

“No!” Cho gasped. “You can’t be serious! Me?”

“Yes!” said Marietta, snapping her head up and down wildly, and then grabbing Cho about the neck again. “They want you in as Seeker tomorrow against Slytherin!” Cho let out a little squeal, and then paused. She held out her right arm and squeezed her hand in the middle of the air as if catching a Snitch; it worked perfectly. The entire shop fell silent, as they waited to see her reaction.

“I can do this,” she said resolutely. She took a deep breath, and then looked at Harry, her face a mixture of happiness and sorrow. “If it hadn’t been for you, Harry...” Tears welled up in her eyes, and then she reached out and pulled him close, kissing him on the cheek. The room exploded with applause and cheers.

“I told you,” someone spoke to a friend near the back of the shop next to the stairs, “they’re the perfect couple. Always were, always will be.” The clapping was just dying down when George noticed a visitor descending from upstairs.

“You made it!” he called out.

Harry, still holding Cho in his arms, looked up to see who he was talking to. She stood there, holding the railing as if trying to steady herself, her two black eyes locked on Harry’s.

“Gabriella?” Harry choked.

“Oh, screwt,” Cho whispered a phrase that had been picked up in their fourth year.

“Oooh, this is going to get good,” whispered a fourth year, seeing the anger building in Gabriella’s eyes.

“You knew?” Harry whispered out of the side of his mouth, as Cho dropped her arms to her side, and straightened the shop apron she was wearing.

“We all did... sorry, Harry. It was supposed to be a...”

“Harry Potter!” Gabriella yelled, descending the stairs and brandishing her wand. Cho ducked behind the counter next to Fred. “You two-timing...” she sent out a shot of purple light that hit left of Harry and exploded a glass jar of nougats, “double crossing...” she sent forth another blast that would have hit Harry squarely in the chest, if he hadn’t deflected it into the fourth year under the stairs, who immediately grew batwings for ears, and squealed running out of the store, “snake sucking...” she was nearly upon him when a blast of red erupted from her wand, forcing him to deflect it into the ceiling, “horklump licking...” she stood in front of him, her wand was directly under his chin. The shop was silent, as the wizard and the witch stood toe-to-toe, and the tension filled the air.

“Perfect,” whispered Theodore Nott, a twisted grin hung on his face. He had just finished making his purchase, and stood only three feet away. “It’s about time you got yours, Potter. And from a girl no less, how...”

Still holding her wand under Harry’s throat, Gabriella reached out with her other hand, and struck at a nerve just at the base of Nott’s neck. He let a short, shrill cry of pain and fell to the ground unconscious. Seeing him fall, a hint of a smile creased Harry’s lips, and when his eyes moved up to meet Gabriella’s he saw, surprisingly, a twinkle.

“Horklump licking?” he asked, his smile growing wider.

“I was lousy in drama class,” she said rolling her eyes, slipping her wand away, pulling him close and kissing him hard. Except for Nott, still on the floor, everyone in the room cheered.

“Happy Valentines Day, Harry!” George called out, as sales began again.

“Correction, Harry,” Fred added with a grin, “Happy Valentines Weekend!” Cho and Marietta both gave Gabriella a welcoming hug.

“What?” said Harry perplexed. “Don’t tell me you’re all in on...” the collective grins surrounding him told him that he’d just been had by Fred, George, and a good portion of the students at Hogwarts, except perhaps the fourth year with batwings.

“It was Ron’s idea,” Cho laughed.

“Ron?” Harry asked. “Where’s...” On the staircase Gabriella had just descended, stood Ron with Hermione, Ron smiling a bit more than Hermione.

“They were helping me get my room together,” said Gabriella, still smiling.

“Your room?” Harry asked, still trying to catch up.

“Fred and George said I could stay the weekend. I thought I’d at least stay and watch Cho fly tomorrow.”

You could have knocked Harry over with a feather he was so giddy. He held Gabriella in his arms, and kissed her again.

“How could you think I’d be mad, after Hedwig brought me this? Chocolate... as if.” She held up her right hand to display a ring, woven from spun gold, and laced with scarlet rubies, the colors of Gryffindor. He would tell her about this ring one day, but not here, not now.

“I brought a present for you, too,” she whispered in his ear, “but I left it in my room.” Her eyes twinkled ever more brightly. “Do you want to see it?” Harry looked at Gabriella and then up to the second floor.

“Sure,” he said with a smile. Then he turned to Cho who was selling a bag of fireworks to a fourth year. “Cho, I’ll be right back.” Cho watched Gabriella and Harry ascend the stairs. Passing Ron and Hermione, he punched Ron on the shoulder, but the redhead only laughed.

“Sure you will, Harry,” Cho whispered under her breath with a smile. “Sure you will.” She handed three fireworks to the fourth year. “Six sickles, please.”

Author's note: Half Blood Prince approaches, and I see now that my story will not be finished in time. I suspect most will be busy reading Book 6 over the next few weeks. I've decided not to peek until this story is finished. When you're done reading, please check back. This tale should be done by then too, and you can tell me whose is better ;)

Thanks for the great reviews and insightful criticism. Perhaps the keenest has been difficulty tracking the various threads, and as I re-write, I'll try to make those clearer. The story started over a year ago when my son and I wrote the ending on a small fanfiction sight -- just a single scene with Harry and Hermione and... well, that would give it away, wouldn't it? The hard part has been driving to that ending in a cogent, interesting way. Hopefully it wasn't a giant mistake.

Chapter 61 - A Giant Mistake

Unlike the day before, the sky was ominous; thick, black clouds billowed all around and seemed to purposefully descend onto Hogwarts as if driven by some magical power. The wind blew a cold shiver down Harry's spine, and he pulled his cloak up higher about his neck and snuggled more closely to Gabriella. It was hard to believe that she was here, seated next to him in the stands at Hogwarts watching his other passion; but, more amazing was her grasp of the game, her sense of rhythm and pace, and her unbridled enthusiasm for Quidditch. No doubt a large part of the reason Gabriella had become fast friends with Cho.

"That's an illegal block!" she screamed, after Crabbe broadsided Cho for the sole reason of trying to knock her from her broom. "Did you see that, Harry? Outrageous! I'd have..." she never finished, and Harry had to wonder what, exactly, Gabriella Darbinyan would do if she had been on Cho's broom.

The match had been tight for nearly two hours, with some of the best flying Harry had seen from either team. Unfortunately, the Keepers weren't much better than sieves and the score was already 320 to 280 in favor of Slytherin. For his part, Harry had spent most of the match watching the two Seekers, Draco Malfoy and Cho Chang. At first, Malfoy flew erratically, weaving as he flew from one side of the pitch to the other, but as the match wore on he slowly gathered his bearings and began to look like the Malfoy of old. Cho, at first, seemed extremely nervous on her new Caduceus, but the broom responded well, and would certainly keep her warm in what was turning out to be an extremely frigid day. Now, two hours in, both Seekers seemed poised to strike, though neither had yet seen the Snitch.

"Hot cocoa, Gabriella?" asked Ginny who was sitting right behind them. Ginny and Dean had spent most the match using the cold air as an excuse to meld into each other's lap. Harry had turned once to point out a particular strategy to Ginny, only to see her locked in a rather slurpy kiss with Dean. When the two weren't kissing, Ginny was admiring the new ring on her finger set with a glowing firestone. Harry had heard enough about the ring last night in the common

room to last a lifetime. It was a promise ring, as Ginny put it, for things to come, though Harry couldn't but help think there was more behind it.

"Sure," answered Gabriella, "I'd love..."

"Score!" announced Colin Creevey, who was highlighting the salient aspects of the game over the magic megaphone while simultaneously taking pictures with an obscenely large telephoto lens. "Ravenclaw pulls within twenty!"

"... maybe a small mug."

There was general applause, but the scores had become so numerous now and the weather so cold, that most people's hands were beginning to hurt, and indeed many had turned to looking for the Snitch themselves in hopes they could point it out to the Seekers. Harry scanned the pitch with them. He thought he'd caught a glimpse of it early in the match out of the corner of his eye, but when he turned to see, Gabriella's face was in the way. It was, perhaps, the first time Harry wasn't disappointed in losing sight of the golden orb.

"Do you need another blanket?" he asked, as the first patter of rain began to fall.

"Have you never used a rain dispelling charm?" she asked, with a tinge of surprise in her voice. "Surely they teach..."

"There it is!" Seamus cried out, pointing to the south end of the pitch near the Slytherin goals. Instantly, everyone stood and the roar from the other side of the pitch made it perfectly clear that they had seen it too. Cho had been searching too high and noted too late the reaction in the stands. Malfoy, to the contrary, had the Snitch firmly in his sites and was already tracking the streaking sphere as it sped toward the Gryffindor stands.

"Cho!" Gabriella screamed above the din, but her words were lost in the winds. Cho turned toward Malfoy and the Snitch, but even on her Caduceus she looked to be too far behind to close the gap. Gabriella

was visibly frustrated and upset. "Go!" she yelled, along with most the Ravensclaws in the nearby stands.

An instant later, a look of dogged determination filled Cho's face. She leaned on the nose of her Caduceus and began to rocket toward Malfoy and the Snitch.

Harry watched the drama on the pitch unfold as the rain splattered against his glasses. IT was coming down much harder now and visibility was much worse. At first, Cho was set on an intercept, but looking closer Harry could see she was swinging high.

"The wind," Harry whispered, "she knows."

"Yes," said Gabriella, and then realizing more fully, "Yes! She does know, Harry ! We talked about your last match this morning, and I mentioned the wind."

Still it didn't look good for Cho. Malfoy was upon the Snitch, his fingers closing around its golden wings, when it suddenly changed direction, heading up and into the wind. Perhaps it was the rain, perhaps it was his still unsteady hand, but the Snitch slipped through Malfoy's grasp, something it had never done before. The Slytherin looked back over his shoulder, just in time to see Cho, already in position, catch the Snitch in both hands.

"Chang has the Snitch!" Colin yelled over the megaphone. "Ravenclaw wins!"

There was a tremendous groan from the Slytherin stands and an absolute uproar on the Ravenclaw end. Gabriella was jumping with glee.

"I knew it!" she yelled. "I knew she could do it!" She threw her arms out and hit Ron, tumbling him head first into the railing.

"Ayy," Ron groaned, rubbing his forehead.

"Oh, Ron," said Gabriella, turning to help him up, "I'm so sorry. Are you alright?"

"That could have been dangerous!" Hermione yelled, her lips a bit thin. "You could have hurt him. In fact Ron, you should probably go to see Madame Guérir right now."

"I'm not going to see anybody, but Zacharias Smith," he said, a smile starting to revive his face. "He owes me a galleon!" he said with a smile. "Thanks for helping enrich the Weasley estate, Gabriella." He patted her on the shoulder, but Hermione simply scowled. "Come on, Hermione, if we hurry we can catch him before he leaves the pitch. I want to see him cough it up in front of the whole house."

A moment later, both Ron and Hermione disappeared into a sea of red and gold as everyone slowly made their way from the stands. Gabriella was smiling, looking down on the Ravensclaws now surrounding Cho and her teammates down on the pitch.

"She's brilliant," said Gabriella, shaking her head.

"Not as brilliant as you," replied Harry, kissing her gently on the lips. "Did you have fun?" Gabriella nodded her head as she took a bite of every-flavor taffy.

"Passion fruit," she mumbled as she chewed. The began to exit the stands themselves.

"Maybe you could come watch me play next term," Harry suggested. "I've been known to handle my broomstick pretty well." Smiling, Gabriella gave him a slight push on the shoulder, but then her look became more melancholy.

"I'd like that," she whispered.

For a moment the crowd down on the pitch parted to reveal Cho, held up high on Anthony's shoulders, her eyes fixed on Harry and Gabriella, and a broad smile across her face as she held the Snitch up high. Gabriella waved back flashing Cho the number one with her hand, and slowly dropped her hand; Harry noticed the change in demeanor.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I have to go.”

“Go? I thought we had the whole weekend?”

“I know,” answered Gabriella. “Mama’s doing much better, but I don’t think I should leave her alone in the house for so long. I’m sure Papa...” her voice trailed off, and ended with a rather large sigh. “Yes, I have to go.” Harry’s heart was plummeting, but he put on a good face.

“I understand, you’re right,” he said with a half smile. “Family comes first, I’ve always said that, and I always will.”

Gabriella held him close, and then kissed his cheek, “Such a sensitive heart,” she said warmly. “Do you think you can walk me back to Hogsmeade?”

“Hogsmeade? Well, I’m really not...” he stopped, seeing the disappointment in her eyes. “Hogsmeade? Yeah, er, sure... I can walk you to Hogsmeade, let’s go now.” Harry figured his chances of leaving undetected were better if he left with the large crowd of parents and visitors.

The castle grounds and gates were thick with guards and monitors from the Ministry, but their chief concern had been with checking visitors as they entered the grounds, and none seemed overly concerned with the throng now leaving. This was particularly true now that the rain was driving down. Gabriella pulled her wand and cast a spell that deflected the rain to either side of the two of them as they walked hand-in-hand, past the lake.

“A simple spell like this, I would have thought that this school of yours...” she began, but Harry cut her off. He was a bit miffed.

“Yes, yes, don’t blame Hogwarts for my inability as a Wizard. It’s all my fault, believe me.” The irritation in Harry’s voice increased with each word.

"I didn't mean..."

"Didn't you? Every chance you get you put down Hogwarts. I think we have a pretty nice school, and I'd rather you not belittle it."

Still holding hands, they walked along in silence for a few minutes, and then she nodded her head.

"You're right," she said, putting her head on his shoulder. "I think... I think I'm jealous, I don't know why. It's like I see... I see the energy again -- all the things I loved about magic. I miss it."

"Well, you know they want you here."

"They?"

"I want you here too," said Harry correcting himself. "You're sure to enter Gryffindor, and we could..."

"I don't know, Harry," she said with a sigh, "maybe next year when Mama's better."

"You know," he said looking at the water splattering onto the rich earth, "I-I charged it this morning, the stone that is. I don't know why, but I was thinking I could..."

"No," she cut in quickly, "that is forbidden."

"Forbidden?" asked Harry. "But why?"

"Maybe one day I will be able to tell you everything," she said with an understanding smile. "For now, know that you were meant to be the stone's keeper. It is yours to use as you wish, or as the stone wishes to use you, but it can never be used for my family, and that includes me. It is forbidden."

"But..." he began, but she held her hand to his mouth, and he stopped.

They entered into Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes to find George alone at the counter. The atmosphere was much calmer than the night before, and he was busy restocking shelves, while a broom floated about sweeping the floor.

"Where's Fred?" Harry asked.

"And good evening to you, too," George replied. "Typical," he muttered to himself, "I do all the work, and the one with the good looks gets all the credit. Nobody ever asks, 'Where's George?'" His eyes began to open wide with a sudden realization and he smiled. "Look who's playing the truant!" he exclaimed, pointing his finger at Harry. "You know they're going to be looking for you, don't you; all those guards, and Harry suddenly disappeared. They'll think you were kidnapped." George laughed to himself and clapped his hands, then opened up a box. "Oh, and Fred What's-his-name, he's at Diagon Alley. I guess the store there nearly sold out. Pure profit, mate!" George broke out in a large grin.

"You didn't say you'd get in trouble!" Gabriella scolded Harry. "You need to get back... now!"

"But I thought we could..."

"Now!" said Gabriella, sternly.

Harry hung his head, but she grabbed his chin, pulled his head up and kissed him on the lips; and, as her finger ran across his ear still wearing the caduceus earring, a tremendous tingle ran up the side of his body. Cho had been right. There were things that witches could do that Muggles could only dream of, at least Muggle boys.

"Goodbye," she whispered. "I love you."

She slipped out her wand taking a step backwards. There was a soft crackle in the air, and she was gone.

"She can apparate!" exclaimed Harry, his jaw wide open.

"It is good to see that your education at Hogwarts has not been for naught," George said coolly. "You're a master of observation."

"But I never knew. She never..."

"Harry," George interrupted, "she's right, if you don't get back to Hogwarts soon, they'll have search parties all over town, and that's bad for business. Might I suggest, Honey..."

"Yeah, yeah, alright, I'm going, okay!" Harry spat back, turning toward the front door, when he saw, just in time, Professor Snape through the front store window.

"Damn, it's Snape; where can I hide?"

George pointed to a large crate in the corner of the store, and Harry ducked behind it just as the front door swung open, ringing a bell with a high pitched jingle. Snape sauntered in carrying a small velvet bag, trying to appear as casual as possible, but it was clear he wasn't there to make a purchase.

"Professor, er, Snape, isn't it?" George asked, pretending to rekindle a long forgotten memory. "How can Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes be of service this evening?"

"Ever the comedian, eh, Mr. Weasley?" Snape drawled in a none too flattering sneer.

"Pays the rent, sir; pays the rent. Is there something you need?"

"I've prepared a potion for your brother; the moon will be full by week's end, and I thought he might like to ease his pain."

"A potion?" George asked stunned. "For Fred?"

Snape took out a small bottle from the velvet bag, and set it on the counter.

“He should take half the potion two days before the full moon, and the remaining potion the day of,” Snape said, folding the velvet sack in his hands and slipping it in his robes as he turned to leave.

“Professor,” George asked, “will this interfere with any other potions?”

“The rubbish they provide at St. Mungo’s isn’t fit to swallow,” Snape said over his shoulder as he approached the exit.

“The one he’s taking is from Mrs. Darbinyan,” said George, “He’s been doing quite well with it so far, mostly just sleeps through the whole night.” Snape stopped in his tracks and spun sharply.

“Darbinyan?” he said, with more edge in his words than he cared to put there. “Are you sure it was Mrs. Darbinyan, and not her husband?”

“As I understand it, Mr. Darbinyan took off some time ago, leaving the two women home alone. Gabriella dropped off the potion yesterday; she said it was from her mother. By the way, how is your arm, anyway?”

Snape grimaced, reliving the incident in his mind, paused for the slightest of moments, whispered, “They will not interfere,” and then left without saying another word. Harry waited a few minutes before slipping out from behind the crate.

“That was odd,” he said, looking out the window and watching Snape head toward the road to Hogwarts. The sky was darkening, and he was sure people were already asking where he might be. He cursed himself for not thinking to tell Hermione, or Ron.

“Tell me about it,” George answered. “The man has never so much as lifted a finger for my family before.” He picked up the bottle of green liquid from the counter. “Do you think it’s poisoned?”

“No, not from Snape,” Harry answered, “but it might turn Fred’s fur green,” he smiled, and then the smile fell. “Is he doing okay... really?” George’s face still bore a smile.

“Absolutely, Harry,” he said brightly. “Mrs. Darbinyan’s taken an interest in him for some reason. She won’t take money for the potions, and they really do seem to work. I think Lupin’s a bit envious, but he doesn’t have the nerve to ask if we can get some for him too.”

“Why doesn’t he ask me?”

“Well... are you two even talking? I think the last time you spoke to each other, you accused him of taking over the Order, or something very Potter-like. After that, he saves your life at the attack on Hogwarts, and then he helps cover for you and Gabriella at Grimmauld Place, and you don’t say so much as a thank you.”

“But, I... well, I...” But Harry didn’t have an answer. George was right, it had been two months since he had spoken to Remus in any meaningful way, and Harry had never taken the time to properly... “I haven’t even owled him,” he groaned. “Where’s he staying, at Grimmauld?”

“He says he doesn’t think you’d want him staying there.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“That’s what mum said, but he wouldn’t listen,” George said, flipping a sign on the store that said closed. “Look, you need to get going, and I mean now. Honeydukes closes soon, and if they do, you’ll have to make your way past the Ministry guards at the school gates.

“Yes, yes, I’m leaving,” Harry agreed. He would have rather stayed, but George was right, they would be looking for him.

It was a bit frightening making his way down the tunnel from Honeydukes. Just as he made his way down below the store’s trapdoor, the earth shook, tremors he believed from more underground building on the part of Hagrid and Firenze. He wondered if, perhaps, the caverns that they had created might have intercepted this passageway, but as he came close to the castle he found none. There was another violent shudder of the earth that almost tossed him to the ground. Something was wrong, and the sensation only

grew worse as he made his way out of the tunnel behind the old crone.

It was growing late, but not that late on a Saturday night, and the corridors were empty. Quickly he made his way back to Gryffindor tower without seeing so much as a ghost; only the jeers from the portraits accompanied him on his journey, warning him to return at once to his common room, or suffer the consequences. When he passed through the portrait of the Fat Lady, he ran into Hermione who seemed to be waiting for someone... he didn't need to wonder who.

"Where... have... you... been?" she hissed under her breath.

"Nowhere," Harry shrugged his shoulders, "just walking around."

"Walking around?" she narrowed her eyes.

"Well, yeah, I..." and then he noticed; a throng of students was gathered about the common room window.

"What are they doing? What are they doing?" said a first year, trying to levitate himself up over the group to see from behind, but falling to the ground every time.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"As if you didn't know, Harry Potter," Hermione scoffed. "Walking around, hah! I had to look Professor McGonagall in the eyes and tell her everyone was here," she said, her voice trembling with anger. "So what were you doing, watching them come in from Hagrid's cabin? From the Forest? Do you know how dangerous that is? Colin tried to get a picture and was almost trampled."

There was another tremor that shook the castle walls.

"The little one looks mad!" someone from the window called out. "He's shaking a fist at Dumbledore! I can't believe the Headmaster's even trying to talk to them. Mum always said he was a bit of a coot."

There was another rumble and a few shrieks, and finally Harry began to understand.

"Where's Ron?" he asked Hermione.

"Out there!" she yelled, pointing through the window now plastered with students. "He's looking for you!" Hermione was clearly upset, and tears began to fill her eyes. Whatever control she was trying to muster, began to slip through her fingers like so much sand.

Harry stepped toward her. "It'll be okay, I'll get him back." He tried to hold her in his arms, but she balled up her hands into fists and pounded him on the chest.

"How... can you... be so... self-centered?" Hermione yelled out. Finally, she stopped and let Harry hold her as she cried. "He was supposed to be back a half-hour ago," she sobbed. "I told McGonagall... I... I...Damn you both!"

The ground shook again.

"Whoa!" someone yelled. "He just tore that oak out like he was picking flowers!"

"Giants?" Harry whispered into Hermione's ear. She pulled back, looking into his eyes.

"You... you didn't know?" she sniffed. Harry shook his head.

"I walked Gabriella to Hogsmeade; she had to go home tonight. I snuck back underground. The castle is deserted downstairs."

"Everyone's at the windows waiting to see what happens." She wiped her eyes and sat down. "Professor Dumbledore's trying to convince their emissary, or whatever he is, that Voldemort's lying to them. He's trying to prove that the Wizarding world has changed; the only thing is... they both know it's not true. I think if Ron didn't know Hagrid, he'd just as soon see the whole giant race buried in a cavern somewhere."

Harry glanced at the window, and then turned to leave.

"Wait, you can't go," Hermione said, taking her to her feet. "He'll be back; I know he will... any minute now."

"I can't leave him out there by himself," Harry said, as the portrait opened.

"Funny," said Hermione, stepping toward him, "he said the same thing about you."

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, as she moved out the portrait as well. "Somebody needs to stay here in case..."

"Yeah, he said that too... not this time." Her words were emphatic, as her reason for being in Gryffindor became ever apparent. "I think I know where he's gone, follow me."

Carefully, the two made their way down to Firenze's classroom. Only the occasional ghost floated past, complaining that the castle would be leveled to rubble and they'd have nowhere to live. When they entered the underground caverns, they were both surprised to find house elves. They were doing much more than cleaning; they were preparing. Supplies were being stocked in the kitchen, and potions levitated into the underground infirmary. They were all too busy to pay any attention to the two wizards walking through the tunnels.

"In case things go bad," Hermione whispered.

As they entered the large, main underground chamber, Harry stopped, and looked at the beehive of activity. A half-giant, working with a centaur made these caverns, and now they were being finished by house elves, and yet, the average wizard would sooner spit in the face of another magical creature, than call them their equal.

When they exited into the Forbidden Forest, it was dark. The sky, blanketed in clouds, only hinted that a full moon would arrive soon. Harry pulled his wand to light the way, but Hermione stayed his hand.

“We can’t chance they’ll see us, Harry. The smallest mistake could send them into a rage.”

In the dark, they picked their way as best they could toward the castle, taking an occasional branch or stinging vine in the face. Hermione was hoping that Ron, who said he’d look for Harry by Hagrid’s cabin, just got caught up in the moment, and was still watching the gathering of giants and wizards. As they stumbled along, Hermione told Harry what he’d missed.

Three giants had traveled to Hogwarts to speak with Dumbledore, at his request. He had tried to speak with them on their own ground in the mountains, but they felt that their families were somehow threatened. Hermione thought, rather, that these three had a falling out of sorts with the others, and were hoping for some wizard gift that would give them the upper hand back home. Dumbledore thought it better to have three more giants on his side than not, and agreed to speak with them. He wasn’t, however, going to simply give them some new power to go back and kill their own kind, although he knew that was likely what Voldemort’s Death Eaters had already given their adversaries back home in the mountains.

Most of the school’s senior staff was at the meeting in case things got out of control, but so far there had only been the occasional foot stomping or tree throwing, which Hermione suggested meant that things were going as well as could be expected.

“What about Hagrid, or Grawp?” Harry asked.

“Hagrid took Grawp deeper into the forest, just to make sure there weren’t any unnecessary distractions. Grawp was picked on pretty severely when he was there, and even though he’s grown, he’s still pretty small.”

The ground shuddered again, and there was a large crash as a tree plummeted into the canopy of branches above them, splintering in two and landing to either side. The shattered trunk, four feet across, could have smashed them both. Harry gave Hermione a glance, which she reciprocated, each flashing only the slightest flicker of concern for Ron, and then they both pressed on.

When they came to the back of Hagrid's cabin, they could see the dark silhouette of one giant's head and shoulders poking up above a knoll on the horizon. It looked like a large boulder ready to roll down the hill. Bonfires lit the grounds just toward the Quidditch pitch, providing both light and warmth against the night's cold darkness in the only area of the school grounds large enough to hold a meeting with such massive beings. Harry looked at the darkened figure, and a wave of something akin to nausea flooded his body. Perspiration broke out from every pore, and he fell to his knees.

"Harry," Hermione whispered, "what is it?" She knew better than to believe he was afraid; something else was wrong. Harry took a deep breath, and brought one foot up, as he knelt on one knee, and wiped his brow. His forehead didn't ache, but still he knew, just as he knew about the Magpies... he knew.

"Voldemort," he uttered in a low scratchy tone. "They... they're under his control."

A branch snapped, and Hermione spun brandishing her wand in the face of a much surprised redhead. He held his arms in the air, unable to see the face of the witch holding the wand against his neck, though the thatch of hair looked familiar. Still, he was a bit taken aback knowing a wand was at his throat.

"I... I didn't mean," he stumbled in a squeaky voice, "I mean... er, honest... I was just..."

"Ron?" Hermione asked, making out his features using the dim light that flickered behind her. She dropped her wand and grabbed him in her arms. "Ron!" she whispered, but the reunion was short-lived

"This way Minister," came a voice from toward the front of the castle, "you can't miss them, sir."

A group of six wizards was marching down the front lawn, past Hagrid's hut and around the back of the castle toward the pitch.

"Their evil sir, the whole lot," said another wizard. "Kill them now and that's three less to worry about later."

"Nonsense," Arthur Weasley said dismissively. "They may be dangerous, they may be a bit dimwitted, but they're not all evil. We have to try."

"Dad," Ron whispered. He made a move to go forward, but Hermione held him by the arm.

"We're not supposed to be here, remember?" she hissed. "We can't get in the way, there's no telling what will happen."

"Ron," Harry said sharply, "can you hear their thoughts, the giants I mean; can you tell what they're thinking?"

"No," Ron answered, "I've been trying all night, but all I'm getting is fog, just a jumble of noise that doesn't make sense."

Just then Professor Flitwick appeared from the direction of the giants, and met the party of Ministry officials just a few yards from where the three students were hiding.

"Minister Weasley," he said politely.

"Just acting, Filius," replied Mr. Weasley with a smile, "but I am here in my official capacity to attempt to reason with our potential allies."

"Yes, yes," replied Professor Flitwick brightly, "Professor Dumbledore's been expecting you."

"Excellent, will you be doing the introductions then?"

"Well, that's just it," Flitwick said a bit nervously, "Professor Dumbledore would rather you not enter the conversations just yet; there may be a problem."

"Problem?"

"It appears they're waiting for you, Arthur, the giants that is, and it's not at all clear that their motives are entirely... good natured, shall we say?" He made a few steps toward the castle, taking Arthur Weasley by the arm. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to wait at the castle, for just a few minutes. When things become clearer, I'll come to bring you down."

"Ridiculous," responded Mr. Weasley, as he pulled his arm from Flitwick's grasp, and then turning to his entourage, "I'm very well protected, I can assure you. Gentlemen, let's proceed."

Against Professor Flitwick's gentle recommendations, the group of wizards made their way toward the flickering light, disappearing as they passed over a knoll.

"Dumbledore knows," Harry whispered.

"Knows what?" asked Ron.

"He can read a mind as well as anyone, Ron," answered Hermione. "Either he knows something's wrong, or he's picking up the same mental shield your own mind can't penetrate, and that's almost as good an indicator to suggest there's evil at play here."

"I don't think something's wrong," Harry said sharply, "I know it. It smells of Voldemort, I can feel it in my veins. Let's go!" He stood to run, but Hermione grabbed his arm just as she had Ron's.

"Go and do what?" she said sharply. "What are we going to do that the Hogwarts' senior staff and four Aurors aren't going to be able to do?" She could see Harry pressing to run. "Relax, you've got to believe Dumbledore knows what he's doing."

"They work for Voldemort, and I've got to tell him! He may not know; he might hesitate, and... I don't know... I've got to..."

"Harry, you've got to calm down. If..." but the point was mute. While Harry and Hermione argued, Ron was making his way toward the back of the flickering bonfires.

“Damn!” Hermione spat, as they watched Ron sprint up to the top of the knoll. “Okay then, Harry, move quickly, and move quietly.”

They ran as fast as they could to catch Ron, but he was much faster than either of them on foot, and in a flash he too had disappeared over the knoll to the other side where the meeting of massive proportions was taking place.

“This is not good,” Hermione breathed.

“No, Harry agreed, panting, “no it’s not.”

Chapter 62 - Crushing Defeat

Even as he ran to catch Ron, Harry wondered what this feeling was inside him. He sensed it before the practice with the Magpies, and now... now he wasn't sure. His skin was clammy, and he felt as if he'd just spun his broom in a roll about a dozen times. It wasn't the familiar ache; instead, every fiber of his being was screaming a warning from within. But, was it a warning about Voldemort, or just a warning to be careful? He'd been so sure a minute ago... but now, running across the field toward the mountains the giants looming high above, he wasn't so confident. He was outpacing Hermione and still keeping Ron in view.

Coming across the knoll that looked down on the pitch and the back of the castle, Harry stopped and his jaw fell. He'd heard Hagrid tell stories of giants before, but seeing them, sitting at the pitch and still towering high above the wizards standing by them, he had to gawk.

"Bloody, hell," he gasped, even as Ron plunged headlong down toward them.

Hagrid had described their height, and of course he'd seen Grawp, but Hagrid's descriptions and even Grawp's enormity didn't touch the massive beings down on the pitch. They were twice the size of a mountain troll, and yet it was their breadth that was most intimidating. They weren't fat, but rather a new definition of 'big boned' -- simply massive looking as if they'd been chiseled from an enormous block of stone.

Ron was halfway down the knoll to the pitch, when Hermione came up to Harry's side. They were too late and Harry's stomach sank knowing what was about to happen. Together they watched as Professor Dumbledore stepped over to the six new wizards that had just arrived, and pointed toward Mr. Weasley by way of an introduction. The smallest of the three, at some twenty feet high, turned and spoke to the largest at over twenty-six feet. Arthur Weasley bowed politely as the larger giant stood.

"Dad!" Ron screamed, racing down onto the pitch. "Dad, it's a trap!" The wizards turned to see the young redhead barreling down toward

them, and in that moment Harry's head cleared and the nausea passed, as if a great boil had just been lanced.

"Oh, no," breathed Hermione. "Ron, no!" she screamed, and started running at full speed down the hill.

In the time it takes to wonder what you had for breakfast, the largest giant had Arthur Weasley about the waist in his hands and was turning to run. The scene reminded Harry of an old King Kong movie as everyone pulled their wands, but hesitated for fear of hitting the Minister.

"Dad!" Ron screamed again, now upon the group, his wand drawn, but the smallest giant turned, and with the flick of his hand struck Ron and sent him flying into one of the bonfires near Hermione. Harry heard the hiss of Ron's flesh as it struck hot embers, and listened as he screamed in pain. In a blink, Hermione had extinguished the flames and pulled him off the coals, but the screams continued.

In the same instant, the giants began to bound up toward the castle taking enormous strides. At that point, the wizards on the ground decided to take action, and a flurry of spells rained down on the backs of the three enormous beings. A sure strike by Dumbledore dropped one to the ground, but the smallest pressed on following the one holding Arthur Weasley, as it crashed directly into and through the castle walls.

"They've been charmed!" one of the Aurors bellowed below. "There's magic at work!"

Glass shattered from the upper stories and the sounds of screams could be heard from the upper Ravenclaw dormitories. The castle's great stone wall began to shudder, as the ground rumbled and then there was a great crashing noise as the giants blasted through one interior wall after another. Harry looked back to the pitch, to find the wizards taking chase on foot toward the castle, but they were too slow and well behind as the stones began to fall. Unable to apparate on school grounds, the giants had the upper hand when it came to covering ground by foot.

Harry spun on his heels and ran, fast and hard, toward the front of the castle steps. There was another crash and he looked back over his shoulder to see the castle wall begin to collapse. It was the Ravenclaw tower and Harry was sure they had all been at the windows watching the meeting take place below. It had all happened so fast, they had no chance to pull away from the windows. There were more screams, and then shouts as about a dozen wizards levied their wands to hold the wall in place; it slowed, but still the wall fell, just as Dumbledore slipped within.

The ground shook again, nearly knocking Harry off his feet. Turning his back on the disaster behind him, he concentrated on the disaster he was sure to face up ahead. He readied his wand as he came around to the castle's front steps, stopped and waited. His breaths were hard and fast, almost keeping cadence to the crashes growing louder with each shudder of earth, each crumbling interior wall. He was ready when it happened.

The front doors, or rather the full front wall of Hogwarts' Castle, exploded outward sending rock and glass flying everywhere. Harry deflected the debris with a shielding spell as the smallest giant emerged, followed by the larger close on his heels. They were both covered in dust and rubble, and the smaller giant had a huge gash on his right arm that was spraying blood everywhere. Fortunately, perhaps, the larger giant still held the unconscious Mr. Weasley in his hands like a limp, bloodied rag-doll. The larger giant roared something Harry didn't understand and pointed toward the forest. The smaller giant nodded and started to run, but stopped short when he saw Harry standing in his way. The Gryffindor never felt so small in all his life, but he wasn't about to back down now.

Harry let fly a stunner that hit the smaller giant squarely in the chest; he took a step back and roared as if he'd been stung by a bee. Harry could feel its hot spit rain down on his face; the stench was tremendous. Again, he let fly a stunner, only this time he aimed lower, and this time the giant fell to his knees, revealing the larger giant from behind. He held up Mr. Weasley in his hands and gave him a short shake, and Harry knew at once it was a threat to kill him, if he wasn't already dead. Harry stepped closer; his hands began to tingle and his stomach turned. He somehow knew that this one at least was under

Voldemort's control. Harry slipped his wand away, and held out his hands to offer surrender. The large giant smiled a yellowed, slime of a smile and took a step to go, kicking the smaller giant to get to his feet. He tumbled forward when Harry cupped his hands to his mouth.

"I am Harry Potter!" he cried out. "HARRY POTTER!"

Hearing the name, the giant stopped at once, and looked closely at the tiny wizard standing in his way. One giant looked at the other, then back at Harry, and then the smaller one nodded grumbling something Harry didn't understand, and moved to grab Harry in his bloodied arms, but Harry instantly brandished his wand, and he halted. Harry motioned to Mr. Weasley.

"Me for him!" he called in a slow, loud voice. "Potter for Weasley!"

Again the two giants conferred, this time speaking to each other with voices resonating like claps of thunder. There was another loud crash and more screams, as one of the interior floors collapsed inside the castle. The giant that was bleeding pointed to his arm and shook his head and that's when the larger one motioned for Harry to move closer. He pointed at Harry's wand, and Harry dropped it to the ground at his feet. A flash later, Mr. Weasley was on the ground, dropped from the giant's dangling hands some six feet off the ground, and Harry was in the giant's grasp racing toward the Forbidden Forest. The grip was tight, too tight -- it was impossible to breathe.

With each stride, he could see up over the giant's shoulder toward the castle. Nobody had seen Harry face the giants at the front door. Nobody was giving chase. A few students and a wizard or two found Mr. Weasley at the front steps of the castle. Someone started to make chase, but the castle rumbled, and he cast a spell to shield the Minister from the falling debris. Then, there was a red flash immediately followed by a tremendous yellow-white light that poured out from the castle windows; like a star being born, it was blinding. "Dumbledore," thought Harry, as the brilliance was soon obscured by branches of the forest. The last he could see, everyone was trying to save the castle; they had given up trying to capture the giants, and Harry was sure that had been the creature's plan, or Voldemort's plan, all along.

He tried to pull short rasps of air into his lungs as the giant continued to hold him tightly, and with his lack of air his vision began to fail. He wondered if Voldemort would be happy or sad when the giants delivered a dead Harry Potter at his feet. He tried one last time to wriggle even a finger, but it was as if his body was encased in rock--nothing moved. There was something peaceful about knowing the end was near. He would be with his parents at last. Images of his life began to flash across his eyes. A cutting sense of concern for Ron made him wince with regret that he could not have been faster.

He was on his last breath, or wish for one, his head flopping loosely against the giant's thumb. All before him was darkness and he began to let go of the mortal realm. Suddenly, a blast of purple light filled the air and the smaller giant screamed in agony. There was another blast, and another, and another, all various colours, and the giant holding Harry loosened his grip. A blast of fresh air filled his lungs, just as it had when he plunged up from to the surface of the lake during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. His vision returned and to his surprise he saw but one wizard casting spell, after spell. The small giant was down, dead or unconscious, and the wizard's efforts were focused firmly on the giant holding Harry. Spell after spell struck with great precision, never hitting Harry, and ever loosening the grip the giant had on him. More air filled Harry's lungs, and he began searching his mind for things he could do to set himself free.

With Harry locked in his stony grip, the giant advanced toward the wizard that was casting spell after spell. His magic seemed to be taking its toll, but not just on the giant. Whoever was sending the streams of coloured jets out of their wand was growing weaker. The large giant stumbled forward and with a great sweep of his hand sent the wizard flying some twenty yards and into the trunk of a tree. There, he crumpled to the ground and did not move. The giant let out a deafening roar of triumph and went to check his companion. With his foot he kicked him over and when he did not respond, the large giant gave a short loud grunt, and started on his way.

The grip tightened once again, only this time Harry had time to think remembering the one thing he held to advantage--the Heart of Asha. It had just been recharged, and just as it strengthened his ability to

heal, it would strengthen his ability to kill. He closed his eyes and reached deep within.

“Bravery. Wisdom. Love,” he whispered, and instantly he felt himself falling out of one reality and into another. “Show me,” his mind commanded the darkness, and the veil opened up to an energy he was sure was the giant’s. It was not as large as Harry expected, certainly not in keeping with the creature’s physical stature, and was woven in yellow and red strands, spinning like a small cocoon on a thread. Harry willed himself closer and reached his hands toward the life force -- an energy he would take to save his own.

But just as his hands were about to take hold of the giant’s energy in this other realm, a smell, or rather a stench, filled Harry’s senses. In a place where no senses existed, it was an odd sensation and yet a familiar one. He reached with his own mind passed the giant’s life force, and reached beyond, toward the reek. There, in a corner of nothingness, was a dull green glow. Harry moved toward it, the odor becoming unbearable. It was a tangle of dark, fibrous tentacles that weaved their way outward from a dull, dark-green glob.

“Voldemort,” he thought, and he reached his hands toward the glow. It pulled back, but too late. Harry had the Imperius Curse in his fingers, and squeezed with all his might. It exploded like a filibuster firework sending sparklers everywhere, and in every imaginable colour, and then Harry let go of that reality and returned to the hand of the giant.

He felt as if he’d been kicked hard in the stomach and, when he opened his eyes, he found that they hadn’t moved twenty yards from the smaller giant still motionless on the ground. The grip around Harry’s chest loosened immediately and he gazed up to see the large giant looking down at him with a confused expression.

“Your friend,” Harry called out, pointing at the other giant. “Let me help.”

He wasn’t sure if he was being understood, but the large giant opened his hand and let him loose onto the ground. Harry ran over to the other giant and again reached within to find the being severely

wounded. After he poured himself out to heal the wounds, Harry reached beyond and again found and destroyed Voldemort's Imperius Curse. It took every ounce of will power, and when he pulled back to reality, his knees gave out from under him, and he fell to the ground.

The small giant sat up and said something to the large one who uttered something in return, and then the small giant turned to Harry and said in a large gruff voice, "Harry... Potter... Thank you."

"You speak English?" Harry asked, taking a deep breath, rising to unsteady feet. The small giant flashed him a stubby smile. Suddenly, Harry remembered the other wizard who had tried to save his life. He staggered over to the trunk of the tree where the cloaked wizard lay moaning on the ground. He pulled back his hood and found Draco Malfoy.

"D-Draco," Harry sputtered in amazement.

There was a thin smile on the blonde's face, as a trickle of blood dripped down from the corner of his mouth. He let out a short chuckle, and spat a weak cough. He did not look well.

"I thought I'd be saving an old redhead," he wheezed. "If I had known it was going to be you, I'd have stayed in the dungeons and been crushed in the castle."

"You knew? You knew!" Harry yelled. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Who says I didn't?" Draco let out another cough, and more blood spewed from his mouth, splattering Harry in the face and speckling his glasses.

Harry wasn't sure if he should strangle him on the spot, or save his life so he could strangle him later. The Gryffindor was already drained and he wasn't sure he could save Malfoy's life even if he wanted to. Still, he placed his hands on Malfoy's chest and closed his eyes. It was easy to see where the internal injury was. Not nearly as bad as Harry had feared, he reached out and stopped the bleeding that was

filling Malfoy's lungs. But when he pulled back away and opened his eyes, he fell to the ground barely able to move.

"The castle," Harry whispered to Draco into the grass covering his face, "we have to save the castle."

"I-I can't be seen with you, Harry," Malfoy said in remorseful tone. "I'm sorry, I... I can't..." His words were cut short by a rumbling of the earth, but it wasn't the two giants next to them. They were sitting on the ground curiously watching the two wizards. Harry looked up to see Malfoy fade into the foliage. He reached out his hand.

"Wait," he called, but his hand fell weakly to his side.

The earth rumbled again and he felt himself being lifted from the ground, but by smaller hands this time. What happened next, he didn't know as a dull fog filled his head and all went black.

He woke to bright sunlight, the crackle of fire, a smell of smoke, and a wet tongue lapping at his face. Opening his eyes he found himself in Hagrid's cabin, Fang standing over him. There was a clang of pots and pans on the stovetop, and Harry turned to see who made the noise. He groaned when a familiar pain stabbed at his chest. His wound had been aggravated in the clutches of the giant, and when he looked down he found his chest was all bruised.

"Well, good mornin' to yeh, Harry," said Hagrid with a smile, setting a large iron skillet on the stovetop with a clang, and walking over to his side. "Madame Pomfrey said yeh might be tender fer a few days, but that's all. You'll be up an' flying before yeh know it."

Harry tried to sit up, but the pain was too much.

"Here," said Hagrid offering a stone mug, "take a sip."

Harry obliged and immediately felt a soothing sensation spread out across his chest. Finally, he could breathe properly and with Hagrid's help he sat up in bed.

“What... what about Ron, and Mr. Weasley?” he asked. “Where are they?”

“St. Mungo’s,” answered Hagrid. “They’ll both be fine,” he said, reassuring Harry’s questioning eyes. “Hermione took care of Ron straight away, but the Minister almost didn’t make it. He’s tellin’ everybody how yeh saved his life again.”

“But he was unconscious; he didn’t see anything.”

“Oh, well, I guess it was me then that was tellin’ everyone how yeh saved his life.” Hagrid smiled broadly and roughed up the top of Harry’s already tangled hair. He walked over and cracked an egg into the hot skillet, and it began to sizzle. The sound reminded Harry of Ron’s flesh.

“Ron’s okay?” he asked again. Hagrid let out a laugh.

“Do yeh know what he’s been doin’ the whole time at St. Mungo’s? Askin’ ‘bout you. I tell yeh, there’s been no closer friends at Hogwarts since James and S...” he stopped himself.

“You can say it, Hagrid,” said Harry. “James and Sirius... the perfect friendship.” There was a sour note in his tone, and then he rolled something over in his mind. “James and Lilly, the perfect marriage, and then young Harry was born... and ruined everything.” He laid his head back to his pillow. “Everything,” he repeated out loud. He expected Hagrid to jump in and say something, but all he heard was another egg crack, and fresh sizzle.

“Is the castle destroyed then, Hagrid?” he asked. And then, without waiting for an answer, an avalanche of words fell from his lips, “Because if it is, it’s my fault, since Ron was looking for me, and if I’d have just stayed put, he wouldn’t have been outside, and I wouldn’t have gone looking for him and said his dad was going to be attacked by Voldemort, and he wouldn’t have run off, and the castle would have still been...” he halted.

“What’s that, Harry?” Hagrid asked with curiosity. “I couldn’ hear yeh. The castle would a been what?” Harry knew the answer, of course.

The giants would still have grabbed Mr. Weasley and carried him crashing through the castle; it had been their plan all along, or Voldemort's. The thought turned in his head.

"The giants!" he exclaimed. "They didn't hurt the giants did they? Please tell me they didn't..." Suddenly, an enormous tremor shook the earth in answer to Harry's question.

For a moment, the sun was blotted out, and the room grew dark, and as the rumble passed, the sunlight returned. "They're here? N-Now?" Harry sputtered.

"Come on, lad," said Hagrid with a smile as he set two plates on the table. "Let's see if yer legs are strong enough teh have a look." He helped Harry out of bed and to the door of his cabin. "You've got the best bed at Hogwarts right now." He swung the door open revealing row after row of tents along the field surrounding the lake. The air was cool against his face, and for the moment it felt refreshing, but he'd been camping in those tents before and was thankful he wasn't casting warming charms every fifteen minutes down by the thawing water.

"As soon as they're sure the tunnels are safe, they'll move everyone down," said Hagrid. "Probably tomorrow."

Harry's eyes turned to the pounding and rumbling noises up at the castle. To his amazement, one of the giants was helping to repair the front face of the castle wall.

"They're helping?" he asked in disbelief.

"When Gryffindor laid the foundation for the school, the giants were here teh help," said Hagrid proudly. "Those were different times, Harry, good times, and you've brought 'em back."

"Me?" asked Harry, not really sure that was a good thing.

Hagrid shut the door and brought Harry over to the table to eat. As he buttered his toast, he told of what had happened after he'd picked Harry off the ground.

“Well, it was just me an Grawpy, see, an’ these two giants jes sittin’ there scratchin’ their heads not sure what teh do. So Grawpy asks ‘em what happened, me not bein’ good at giant speak an’ all, and they start goin’ on about Voldemort an’ his Death Eaters, an’ how they’d been plannin’ on joinin’ Dumbledore, but were captured comin’ across the sea. Grawpy knew ‘em from the mountains and they hit it off right away. But when I asked ‘em to follow us to the castle, they were none too keen on the idea. The little one told us, as best he could, what had happened, an’ figured that the wizards had already killed his brother. But I told ‘em it didn’t matter what happened, cuz Dumbledore wouldn’t kill nobody.”

“Finally, I couldn’t wait no longer, seein’s how you were lookin’ so bad. ‘The Death Eaters will be waitin’ for yeh that way,’ I said to the little one pointin’ teh the forest, ‘or yeh can try yer luck at the hand of Dumbledore.’ An’ I started headin’ to the castle with you in me arms. I gotta say it was a bit touch an’ go there fer a minute as the four of us walked out of the Forest. The Ministry Aurors were ready to blast us all teh high heaven, till they saw I was holdin’ you. Strange, but nobody seemed teh know you was missin’.”

“We had a bit of a shoutin’ match, an’ shoutin’ giants can be heard from pretty far away. Finally, Dumbledore came out of the castle, an’ set things straight. Within minutes, we had Madame Pomfrey takin’ care of yeh here in the cabin, the third giant back up on his feet an’ released from the Imperius Curse, an’ everybody pitchin’ in teh shore up the castle.” The half-giant took a sip of his mug, and a look of pure satisfaction spread across his face.

“Harry, there’s somethin’ bout usin’ yer hands together teh make somethin’ grander than either of yeh could make alone that binds people as one.” He set the mug down. “You-Know-Who thought he’d ruin our chances of an alliance, and kill the Minister in the process, but it’s backfired on him. Who knows what would have happened if the dark beast hadn’t interfered, but now... now his plans have been crushed like the stones being turned to mortar for the walls of Hogwarts.” Hagrid stood and looked out the window, a grand smile beaming across his face.

“And yer right, Harry. It’s all your fault!” He turned, laughed, and clapped his hands together. “Now eat yer eggs before I have Madame Pomfrey whip up a batch of her Invigorator Potion.” Just the thought made Harry wince; if Skele-Gro tasted bad, Invigorator was pure poison. Quickly, he grabbed his fork and took a bite of eggs.

“Hagrid,” said Harry with his mouth half full, “have you seen D- er, Malfoy?”

“Yeah, I seen the little brat. I hear he got banged up pretty good when the castle walls fell, but he’s up walkin’. Probably jes puttin’ on a show fer sympathy again.” Hagrid waved his hands in the air and rolled his eyes. “Why do yeh ask? Yeh don’ figure he had somethin’ teh do with this do yeh?”

“Er... no reason,” answered Harry, shrugging his shoulders. “He just popped into my mind is all.”

Harry grabbed a slice of toast, took a bite, and wondered if, one day, he and Malfoy might build something together, side-by-side. Was it any more strange than the scene right now on the front steps of Hogwarts? Hagrid drew one eyebrow high in bewilderment shaking his head as he looked at Harry stare into space. The young wizard took a bite of eggs and shook his own head as he swallowed.

“No,” he whispered, watching another shadow pass by Hagrid’s window, “oil and water don’t mix.”

Chapter 63 - Vanished

Days turned to weeks, weeks to months, stone upon stone, mortar and magic, and still the castle was not repaired. It took two giants only a matter of minutes to collapse the structure from within, and even with their considerable assistance and the help of their brother, the walls and floors were taking a very long time to put back together. It took tremendous patience on Hermione's part to explain to both Harry and Ron that the damage wasn't just what they could see, but also what they couldn't. Portals to other locations and dimensions had been sundered; time itself had been pulled all through the castle. Neville mindlessly passed one of the guardian orbs, walked through an interior door, and fell into an endless temporal loop. He'd have still been walking through the door, over and over again, if Professor Flitwick hadn't found him as he performed an evening security sweep.

Despite the damage, the mood of the students and the professors was as good as it had been all year. Hagrid was right; something about building with your hands, side-by-side had drawn everyone together. Even Professor Sinistra seemed to smile more, happy that her students were now sleeping in the warming air out under the stars. It was a decision made by all the houses that they would not hide underground, but rather would live defiantly out in the open. It meant that guards posted to protect Hogwarts by the Ministry were supported by student watchers. A pixie didn't light upon the Hogwarts grounds without someone knowing about it. Daytime classes were being taught in the tunnels, while Quidditch practices were moved over the lake.

Ron was well enough to return to Hogwarts the day after his injury, but chose instead to stay through the week until he was sure his father would recover. Mr. Weasley had been badly injured and, as Ron described him, looked more like the inside of a watermelon than the Minister of Magic. Mrs. Weasley cried for days as she sat deathwatch at her husband's bedside and, as she sat, she spoke to her son Ron quite a bit about what had been happening at Hogwarts this year and what role Harry played in saving Mr. Weasley's life. Some days later she sent Harry a post by special ministerial owl. He didn't know why, but he had kept the post in his pocket all term, secretly pulling it out to read now and again. As Easter break

approached, the piece of parchment had grown quite worn and tattered and, as he packed for the holiday, he slipped it into his traveling bag along with his most prized possessions.

“Why don’t you just come back to Grimmauld for Easter, Harry?” asked Ron as the two gathered what few things they could during the short time they were allowed in the boys’ dormitory. “I’m sure dad can set the Darbinyan’s up on the floo and you two can visit whenever you want. Besides, Remus is back now, mate and I’m sure he’d want to see you. You know... outside of school.”

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he packed away the ebon dragonhead and the fiery red ball of cinnabar, and then carefully folded a shirt around his mirror and placed it between more unfolded clothes. Because Tonks was off working for the Ministry, or the Order, or whomever, Remus had taken an office at Hogwarts. The two timed it so that he could teach her classes while he was well; she was always about during the full moon. The hardest part about apologizing to Lupin was getting out the first word, the rest was easy. It began following class during a new moon and Remus was in an exceptionally good mood after everyone successfully defended themselves against an ashwinder. As the room emptied, Harry found himself lingering behind. His presence didn’t go unnoticed by Lupin who, though polite, had been a bit stiff toward Harry since the start of winter term. It was a wall Harry had built with his own hands, and it was time to bring it down.

“What is it Harry?” asked Lupin as the last student left the class. He levitated the ashwinder into her brick cage filled with glowing red eggs. “Your spell today was flawless, certainly you don’t...”

“I’m sorry,” Harry sputtered. Remus leaned back against his desk; he hadn’t expected this. “I’ve been a right arse and I don’t expect you can accept my apology, but you need to know I... I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” Harry slipped his parchment of notes into his pack and looked up at Lupin. “I’d like you to come back to Grimmauld. I mean... if you want. I’d understand if you’d rather...”

“Thank you, Harry,” cut in Lupin with a soft voice. “I’d like that.” He walked over to Harry who was fumbling with his pack. The young

wizard didn't know why his hands were so shaky. "But I think I owe you an apology as well. I think maybe, when Dumbledore took ill and Professor McGonagall retreated into her office... I think I did try to step in and take control. I guess I felt someone needed to lead the charge, and I think I charged to hard... particularly with you."

"Every time I turn around, Remus, you're there protecting me. How can that ever be a bad thing?" Harry took in a deep breath. "I have no one else to knock me back into line. I may not care for it much, but I... I'd like you to keep an eye out for me. You know?"

Remus put his arms around Harry and gave him an embracing hug. "We can keep an eye out for each other, how's that?" he said quietly. Harry nodded into his shoulder not saying a word; he couldn't have spoken if he tried. Remus stepped back still holding Harry by the shoulders and looked into his wet eyes.

"Harry, if you ever need to talk about something, know that you can always come to me. Okay?" Harry nodded, wondering how much Lupin knew already.

Harry grabbed another shirt and stuffed it in his bag for the holiday. Why didn't he just go to Grimmauld place? He looked up at Ron and sighed.

"You know what Dumbledore says. He still thinks..."

"That's rot!" Ron cut in, having heard Harry's reasoning for the hundredth time. "How can he think you're safer there than at a home surrounded by Aurors? It's ridiculous is what it is, some sick pleasure in watching you suffer."

Harry scowled at the insult.

"Well," said Ron, "I just don't get it. Now that you've settled things with Lupin, the place is going to be overflowing with wizards." He levitated his travel-bag off the floor and onto his bed. "Do you think I should bring more socks?"

Neville and Seamus had already gathered their things and were downstairs, but Dean seemed to enjoy listening to Harry and Ron banter. He was going to spend the holiday at the Weasley's ostensibly to help out the injured minister. At least, that's the story he told his parents.

"You know, Ron," said Dean, "if you'd just go barefoot, you wouldn't be wearing holes in them all the time."

"That's just gross," said Ron with a face that looked like a prune.

"He's afraid he'll step on a spider," said Harry flatly.

"Am not!" shot Ron. "I'm simply..." he started, but was cut out by the laughter as Dean began making little crawly figures with his hands, and crept toward Ron with a sinister grin. Ron was near ready to draw his wand when Hermione popped her head in the door.

"You have two minutes! Move!" she commanded with a heated voice, and then as she turned to leave she called back, "And don't forget to bring plenty of socks, sweetie!"

In the train, on the way to London, Dean and Harry told the story to Neville and Seamus, who told it to some friends, who told it to some more friends, and before long everyone on the train was asking Ron if he'd brought enough socks. He was fuming when he finally finished with the prefect's meeting at the front of the train and entered Harry's carriage.

"Can I kill you now?" he asked, steaming a bright red. "Because... I'm getting tired of waiting for Voldemort." Harry nearly fell over.

"Ron," exclaimed Harry with a look of shock. "You said it! You said his name!"

Against the wall, Luna was reading her father's paper. Without looking up she tapped the page with her finger and said in a very matter-of-fact tone, "You know Ron, Gambol & Japes is having a sale on hole-healing socks... three socks for a Sickle."

“Gambol & Japes?” Ron questioned blankly, wondering why a joke shop would sell socks. “Why three?” But Luna said nothing more. Just the thinnest of smiles appeared across her face.

For a moment, Harry smiled too, but the happiness quickly ebbed away. Ron’s words had started his mind to thinking again and that was never good. His thoughts landed squarely on the prophecy of his fate. Months had passed without his making some kind of a link with Voldemort, something Harry had almost grown accustomed to. He had hurt the dark wizard deeply by using the stone, but he was sensing his return to strength and wondered once more if it might not be wise to try again.

Both Neville and Luna sat at his side, a testament to the power he now had at his fingertips but hesitated to use. It was meant to heal, for love, for something other than destruction, and a part of him was worried that if he did use its power to seek out another to deliberately cause harm, however evil, there might be consequences. Gabriella had been so insistent that he tell her everything when he first used the stone and again when he reversed its power on Voldemort, he wondered what her reaction would have been if he had used it for some selfish purpose; she was certainly capable of.... He sighed, shaking his head; it was all too confusing. Hermione, who followed Ron into the compartment, saw the scrunched look on Harry’s face.

“Harry,” she asked, “what’s the matter?”

She had been watching him for weeks, he was sure of it, but he wasn’t sure if she was more concerned about his health or the fact that he’d been speaking to Tonks again about the clues for which he was now sure he had an answer. His mind flashed back to the last full moon.

“What’s the matter, Harry?” asked Tonks, as he looked out across the lake at the silver ball’s shining reflection. Harry held a flat stone in his hand and skipped it over the smooth water, breaking the moonlit rings into shimmering bands that splintered across the surface. “You haven’t stayed after class for weeks.”

Harry looked up at her. She was wearing a bright cobalt blue shawl, and her hair was a limp black. It was the first time she had spoken to him outside of class all term and he adjusted his glasses with his hand as if trying to refocus on what he was seeing.

"Maybe... maybe it's because you told me to bugger off." He tossed another stone out into the lake, this time it splashed hard on the first go. "Maybe it's because you told me..."

"Listen," Tonks interrupted, "I was just having a bad time, that's all." She glanced around, and Harry noticed a nervousness in her eyes that had been absent of late, a look that concerned a part of him, a look that also meant there was a chance to save Sirius again. "You... you said it's water. What water?"

"The falls," Harry replied. He had meant to be dispassionate about the whole thing, but already he could feel his pulse quickening. "In the center of the forest, there's water... special water. It has powers... cleansing powers, healing powers; I'm not sure." He recited the verse he now had memorized,

"Liquid of life that springs eternal

From birth of light to death infernal

Welled from source of endless magic

To bring back those whose loss was tragic."

"In the center of the Forbidden Forest there wells a spring that leads to a waterfall which fills a great pool of water. It was in the Sorting Hat's song this year--Gryffindor cleared the land from the mountain to the falls to build Hogwarts. It has to be the proper ingredient, I'm sure of it."

"I've been through the Forbidden Forest, Harry," answered Tonks, "and there's no waterfall; there's no waterfall anywhere near here."

"I'm telling you I've seen it!" Harry snapped. "Hell, I-I swam in it and since then this..." he held up his fringe to reveal his now clear

forehead, "this has been gone, and so has my connection with Voldemort. So don't tell me it's not there. It's what we need to bring Sirius back; I'm sure!"

Tonks stared into Harry's green eyes for a moment, as if trying to ascertain if he was indeed telling him the truth. His look was sincere, but she still didn't believe. She cast another nervous glance about to see if they were being watched.

"So when can you get me, er, us some of this... this water you're so keen on?"

"Tonight," he said with confidence.

And that night, Harry did fly to the falls. The sky was clear and the moon shone bright. When he arrived, he saw the dark pools below reflecting the starlight above. The roar of the water splashing down onto the rocks below filled his ears. He flew high above the shimmering pools searching all around for danger. Seeing it was safe he finally flew down to gather up the water. As he grew near, there was a snap and where once was water now stood a grove of thick trees. He looked around--the whole scene had changed; even the moon had shifted in the night sky. It took him a moment to gather his bearings, but he realized he'd been transported to a different part of the forest.

"A charm?" he muttered to himself.

He flew back above the trees, found his position and flew back to the falls. They were there as he expected, but when he flew back down to gather water he was again transported to a different part of the forest. Three more times he tried to gather water from the falls and each time found himself in another part of the forest. No matter how hard or how fast he flew, or what angle he approached from, he was transported somewhere else.

He had told Ron and Hermione he would only be gone an hour and it was already approaching two. He knew he'd soon be missed, if not already. He cursed under his breath and returned to the castle; it would have to wait for another day.

But the day never came. Try as he might to slip away, Harry seemed to have someone with him every night. Even when he'd wake up before the first break of dawn, there was a professor or ministerial wizard watching over the encampment. He was sure Hermione had her hand in it.

"Harry," said Hermione again, "are you daydreaming about Quidditch, or Voldemort?"

"I wish you wouldn't," said Ron with a grimace. "I should have kept my trap shut."

"Is it possible to daydream about both?" Harry asked.

"Absolutely," interjected Luna, looking up from the paper. "Ever since the incident with the Magpies, father has had his best investigators looking into the possibility that Voldemort's master plan is to take total control over the world's Quidditch industry."

"That's daft," groaned Ron. Luna ignored the statement.

"They've already discovered that he hates to fly himself because he's afraid of heights, and intends to make all Quidditch matches played below twenty feet so he can compete."

"Apart from Albus Dumbledore, Voldemort isn't afraid of anything," said Harry slumped against the cushion in his carriage.

"Yes he is," said Hermione. "He's afraid of you, Harry."

Shaking his head, Harry just let out a breath of air and waved his hand dismissively.

"That's right." Both Neville and Luna spoke at once, and the unison of their voices made an odd musical chord that resonated in the carriage for just a moment.

"That's all he ever really talked about," said Luna.

“Potter this, and Potter that,” added Neville.

The two never wanted to talk much about their time at the Burrow, and the students had been instructed not to ask, but the time seemed right.

“What else did he talk about?” asked Hermione. Everyone sat up straighter in their seats, even Harry.

“Well,” Neville began slowly, with a tremor in his voice, “all I remember is him talking about Harry better come save me, or I’d end up like my parents.”

“I’m sorry Neville,” said Harry with true remorse, “I never...”

“Sorry?” interrupted Neville, his voice growing stronger. “You saved me... us, didn’t you? Well, you three and Gabriella. I don’t think he ever dreamed it would happen.”

“I don’t think he thought he could ever take ill,” said Luna now folding the paper in her lap and leaning forward. “It’s probably all that dark magic he’s been doing. It’s catching up to him. Father says we may just watch him self-destruct, although when he first crumpled to the floor he kept cursing your name, Harry.”

“And moaning something about a stone,” added Neville.

“That’s right, ‘The stone. The stone,’ over and over again,” said Luna. “Kinda spooky, really.”

Hermione and Ron cast a look at Harry. He had told them he had seen Voldemort take ill, he had never told them how it happened by his use of the vivificus stone.

“Well, he’s not ill anymore,” said Harry taking to his feet. “I need to take a walk.” He opened the carriage door and Ron stood to join him, but Harry stopped him patting him on the chest. “I’ll be right back; I’m just going to take care of business.” Ron nodded and sat down next to Hermione taking hold of her hand.

Harry shut the door behind him and walked down the corridor passing the water-closet and on down toward the rear of the train. He passed carriage after carriage of laughing, sleeping, and pensive students each carrying on with their own lives. Harry stopped and leaned back against the side of the corridor. He felt separate, alienated, wholly apart from the students living their lives on either side. He had often dreamt what that might be like, to simply live out one's life in an ordinary way. What would it be like to have a family that loved him? What would it be like to go to school without a care? What would it be like to live, grow old and die like every other wizard in the world? Harry took in a deep breath and let out a long, low sigh, then turned to return to his carriage.

"Hey, Potter!" a voice called from down the corridor. Harry jumped, and turned to find Cho stepping down toward him. She was smiling at his reaction to her sharp voice. "Good to see you've kept your edge." She took the moment to give him a hug. "How are you?" The question was soft and filled with concern. "We haven't had a second alone to talk."

"Kinda hard with Anthony on your arm all the time," said Harry with hint of sarcasm. "Where is he now, anyway?"

"Sleeping," answered Cho defensively. "You really aren't very fair you know; he's quite sweet."

"Sweet. Right," answered Harry not really sure what to say. He had no right to be jealous, but there it was dribbling out of his mouth. Cho just narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms, but her lips still had a smile.

"You should be careful who you vilify, Harry," said Cho coolly. "In fact, some of your friends..."

"Hey, Potter." This time the voice made both Cho and Harry jump. Blaise Zabini stepped out of the water-closet heading back to the rear of the train where most the Slytherins sat, Cho and Harry directly in his way. "Chang," he said with a nod.

Instinctively, Harry wrapped his hand about his wand, preparing to withdraw it and defend himself if need be. In the same moment, a spell was cast and hit him from behind.

“Expelliarmus!”

The spell, ejecting Harry’s wand from his hand, seemed to surprise even Blaise as Harry spun to find Theodore Nott standing in the corridor, heading their way.

“What timing,” Nott said clucking his tongue, his wand firmly pointed in Harry’s face. “Looks like they were about to attack you, Blaise. Lucky I happened to be walking by.” Hesitantly, Blaise pulled his wand, pointed it at Cho and motioned for her to hand over her wand, but Cho had something else in mind.

She made a motion with her right hand as if looking for her wand while her left hand slipped it out from down her sleeve. Before Blaise could react, his wand arm was hit with a beam of green light and began to swell up to the size of a large hog pulling him down to the floor. She turned to Nott, but too late. A blast of blue light knocked her backwards down the corridor. Then he pointed his wand at Harry. “Time to do what that little puke couldn’t,” spat Nott.

“Stupefy!”

Harry looked down; at his feet Nott was out cold, stunned in the back. Carriage doors swung open and students flooded into the corridors to see what was going on. Harry looked back to see who had cast the spell, a glint of gray and a flash of shimmering hair spun about and disappeared into a sea of faces. An instant later, Ron was at Harry’s side handing him back his wand, his own drawn, and Hermione was helping Cho to her feet. Blaise was yelling for someone to shrink his arm as he helplessly faced at least a dozen wands, while Nott remained motionless.

“What happened, Harry?” asked Ron itching for an excuse to stun Nott again. Harry’s gaze remained fixed down the corridor toward the Slytherin end of the train. He said nothing.

“They jumped us while we were talking,” said Cho rubbing the back of her head.

“It wasn’t me!” cried Blaise. “I-I...”

“Cho!” yelled Anthony Goldstein, his wand brandished and face flush.

At the same moment, a group of Slytherins, including Pansy Parkinson, began pushing their way down the corridor. They too had wands drawn.

“Teddy!” wailed Pansy as she dropped down to try and revive Nott.

“Teddy?” Ron whispered in Harry’s ear. “I thought she and Malfoy...” Harry just shrugged as the Slytherin at his feet began to open his eyes.

“They... they jumped us,” Nott said blearily.

“YOU!” Pansy screamed pulling her wand and pointing it at Harry, but Ron stepped in the way his own wand in her face. Soon, wands were pointing in every direction and accusations began to fly. Harry looked around wondering why no professor or guard had yet come to break up the brawl that was soon going to turn bloody.

“Stop it,” he called, but his voice was barely heard above the din. “STOP IT!” The carriage silenced. “Don’t you see? Don’t you see what’s happening?” Distrust was everywhere. “We’ve worked together all year, for what? To cast spells and hexes on each other?” He slipped his wand back jeans waistband and looked at Ron to do the same. Ron looked at Harry, then at Pansy, then at Harry one more time, then finally lowered his wand and slipped it away.

“Hermione,” asked Harry, “can you take care of Blaise’s arm?”

“I can,” said Cho, and she lowered her wand at him. Crabbe stepped in the way.

“Get out of the way, moose,” said Blaise, hitting Crabbe on the leg with his good hand. Cho knelt down, reduced the arm to normal and

handed Blaise back his wand. Blaise took to his feet and put the wand away. When he did, everyone followed in kind -- everyone that is except Nott.

"It's not that easy, Potter!" he spat. Harry turned to find Nott's wand in his face again.

Everyone reached to draw their wands again, when Harry yelled, "Put them down!" He looked directly into Nott's eyes. "Well, Theodore, what is it you want to do?"

"Harry..." Hermione started; Ron hushed her.

"You can stun me if you want, but I'll wake up again like you did just now." Harry stepped closer to Nott, making the tip of Nott's wand poke him in the throat. "You'll have to kill me if you want to be in his good graces, anything less would be failure and you know what he thinks of failure."

"Who's he talking about," someone whispered from behind.

Nott looked about at the staring faces and his hand began to tremble slightly; Harry could feel the quiver into the flesh on his neck. "Well?" Harry asked. There was no answer, but neither was there a withdrawal of the wand. Harry reached his hand up and wrapped it over the hand of Nott steadying his hand and poking the wand deeper. "Say it," he whispered. "Make daddy proud."

Nott's eyes held a look of terror mixed with tinges of hatred, only Harry wasn't sure the hatred was directed at him.

"Damn you," he whispered back. There was a commotion down the corridor; someone was coming. Harry expected to hear the voice of a professor; it wasn't.

"Nott, what the hell are you doin'?" boomed Greg Goyle. Without hesitation, he stepped up to the two wizards, grabbed Nott's wand arm and pulled him away from Harry. A look of relief spread over Nott's face, but he quickly recovered.

“Goyle, you... you’ve turned soft!” Nott spat. “They brainwashed you while you were over there.”

“We’re in the lead for house-points,” retorted Goyle sharply, “and I won’t have you ruin it for the rest of us. Come on!” He grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him back down toward the Slytherin carriages. The move was very un-Goyle like and Harry liked the new Greg.

With the excitement over, the crowd thinned and everyone returned to their carriages. Anthony held Cho’s hand as he walked her down the corridor, and Harry couldn’t help but watch them disappear into their compartment, leaving him alone with Ron and Hermione.

“Brilliant, Harry,” said Hermione, now that no one was about, “that was really stupid.”

“What was?” asked Harry.

“You know he was probably there when Hogwarts was attacked; he’s certainly on his way to becoming a Death Eater along with Parkinson, Crabbe and Malfoy. He could have used the Killing Curse.”

“Hermione,” replied Harry, “for someone who’s so passionate about helping the less fortunate and eliminating discrimination in this world, you sure jump to conclusions when it comes to the Slytherins.”

“Well, Malfoy for sure!” said Ron emphatically.

“You turned Goyle around, Ron; why not Malfoy?” Ron hur-r-rumphed, but Harry continued. “You brought the Longbottom’s back from nothingness; I wonder if you reached into the darkness of Nott’s mind what you’d find?” asked Harry.

“More darkness,” Ron sneered. “I’m hungry; where’s the trolley?” Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Honestly, Ron,” she said with a sigh, “will you ever stop thinking about food?”

“No,” he answered heatedly.

Hermione smiled. "Well, nobody was seriously injured. With all the commotion, I'm surprised no professors showed up."

"Or guards," added Ron as they turned back toward their carriage and then the redhead stopped. "Or... guards," he repeated slowly.

"What? What is it, Ron?" asked Hermione.

"I told you that ministerial Legilimens they brought on board the train kept crawling into my mind at the prefect's meeting. I've been trying to shut him out since we left Hogsmeade, but..." he paused, "he's not there. It's like he's disappeared." Harry didn't wait for an explanation, nor did Hermione, they both grabbed their wands. In the next breath, all three had their wands out and Harry tapped on the carriage door that Cho and Anthony had just entered. All inside looked up surprised.

Eventually, the entire back half of the train including the carriages containing mostly Slytherins was alerted that something was wrong. At the end of the train, Harry opened the carriage door containing Nott, to find Malfoy holding his wand over Nott's back, bathing it in blue light.

"When we get our hands on the bastard, Nott, we'll take him out," Malfoy said in a slow drawl and then looked up to find Harry in his compartment. There was a momentary look of surprise, but Malfoy quickly regained his composure and held his wand at Harry.

"Hard to believe I have to perform rudimentary healing myself," said Malfoy with a look of distaste in his mouth. "There's not a healer to be found."

"Death Eaters," Harry whispered. Malfoy's eyes widened as the rest of the Slytherins in the compartment drew their wands.

"I don't know where you get your information, Potter, but we're not..."

"Not you," Harry hissed impatiently. "There are Death Eaters on the train. All the adults we know of have disappeared." These words put considerable concern on all the faces in the carriage including Nott's.

"That's not possible," Nott said, bewildered by the news.

"From my compartment to here, we've searched the train and other than students we haven't seen a soul. We're going to take a group and move forward." Some of the Slytherins, including Pansy, were looking scared. "The corridor's too narrow for us to all go forward; only a handful should move up. I need the best wands with me."

"With you?" Malfoy drawled again.

"No, I didn't think so," said Harry as he moved to close the carriage door.

"Wait!" A large hand stopped the door from closing; it was Greg Goyle. "I'll go."

Harry was actually hoping for the Slytherin Head Boy, Giles Adder, who was well known as the best duelist in Snape's dueling club. Nonetheless, the offer represented an opportunity for unity of the houses, and Harry took it. When Hermione saw Goyle, she cast Harry a questioning look, and without speaking he flashed her eyes that said not to ask.

Harry, Hermione and Goyle were joined by Terry Boot of Ravenclaw, and Laura Madley who was one of only two students from Hufflepuff on this end of the train. Slowly they made their way forward. Carriage after carriage opened to reveal students that were oblivious to what was happening. Finally, they reached the last passenger carriage that held students. Up ahead were the meeting carriages and those reserved for adult passengers including professors, guards, and other Hogsmeade travelers. Harry poked his head in telling the group of fifth years what was up.

"I've been wondering what was taking so long with the food trolley," said Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff. "Professor Ulrich from Goblin Studies just stepped out two seconds ago; she's not there?" Harry glanced down the empty hallway and shook his head. "Here," said Ernie, "Laura, I'll take your place. I know a thing or two when it comes

to using a wand.” Harry saw Hermione roll her eyes as Ernie swapped out with Laura.

As Harry slipped back out of the carriage with Ernie, Goyle took the point and started toward the front of the train. Harry was suddenly overwhelmed with a tremendous sense of foreboding; he was about to tell Goyle to wait when, through the glass doors to the box ahead, Harry saw a witch in dark robes suddenly appear in the corridor. She glanced back for only a moment revealing a sinister smile and piercing green eyes. There was a flash of familiarity and Harry yearned for a closer look, but was unable to pass Goyle’s broad shoulders. It didn’t matter; an instant later she was gone and an instant after that the front of the train exploded.

Chapter 64 - A New Day Dawns

The sky was a faint blue and the air hot against Harry's face as he lay down at the pool's edge dangling his left hand into the water. He could feel the sun scorching his front, but he didn't care; he could stay like this for hours just watching her swim, and chat, and smile. Could there be a more beautiful creation on all the earth? Gabriella flashed him another smile then looked up above him, waving at someone. Lazily, Harry turned his head to see who it was. The sun flickered in his eyes forcing him to rise up on his right elbow and shield his vision with his left hand. Drops of water fell soothingly onto his face. It was Emma and Duncan. Harry sat up to say hello, when he noticed Emma holding a chain of thorns that was wrapped about Duncan's neck. She was pulling him along like a dog.

"Hey, mate!" Duncan said with a smile, oblivious to the thorns poking his neck and the blood dripping down his chest. "Bloody hot today, isn't it?" Emma, however, wasn't smiling; in fact, she looked furious. She came to the pool's edge and kicked Harry hard in the leg.

"You ruined everything, both of you!" Emma spat, her eyes narrowing on Gabriella. "He was supposed to die by his own hand, and you..." she pointed at Harry, "you bloody idiot, you had to interfere." She pulled Duncan to the side of the pool. "Well, I don't need him anymore!" she cried and threw him into the water; without making a sound, he sunk and disappeared. Then Emma leaned down next to Harry, pointed at Gabriella, and hissed in his ear, "Her father had me tied down to this place, but no longer; I have my eye set on you... Harry." These last words slipped delicately out of her mouth and she slid her finger down his chest to his navel. "You have something I want," she said lingering low on Harry's waist. Soon, with his help, I'll be rid of this Darbinyan retch and we can be together forever." She held out her hand, and there appeared a wand about eight inches made of ash. She was going to cast a spell at Gabriella who was still smiling at her from the pool as if nothing had happened, but something was stopping her.

Out of Emma's own mouth came, "Put... it... away," only the voice wasn't hers, it was a male's, thick with a foreign accent -- Armenian Harry now knew. Emma's eyes flickered and a look of rage filled them.

“Just a few more errands, Harry,” she said, regaining control of her own voice again. “You’ll see... we’ll have each other, love.” As the ringing of her words died away in Harry’s ears, she faded into nothingness leaving only a rope of thorns upon the hot concrete deck of the pool.

“That was nice of him to stop by and say hello,” said Gabriella placing a cool, wet hand on Harry’s chest. A coldness passed through him as if he’d been run through by Nick.

“Him?” Harry asked.

“Yes, it’s about time you had a chance to meet. He’s always said...”

“Harry! Harry, can you hear me? Harry!”

Harry watched as the pool swirled around like the flush of a toilet.

“I hate this part,” said Gabriella blandly. “It’s so much better here early in the morning. I love to watch the sun being born anew.”

“He can’t be dead! He can’t be!”

“He’s not dead girl; now move aside.”

The voice was Dumbledore’s and it pulled Harry back into the present. Yells and screams, near and far, filled the air, and everyone was crying. He opened his eyes to find a very dusty, very tired Dumbledore kneeling at his side. A breath later, his mind began to focus and his eyes opened wider. Behind Dumbledore stood Cho Chang, a streak of blood running down the left side of her face. On the second breath he sat bolt upright, wincing in pain, his eyes panicked.

“Greg?” he cried. “Where’s Greg?”

He remembered watching as the blast appeared to expand in slow motion out from the center of the boxcar before them. Glass and steel were flying outward in an ever increasing fireball. Harry and

Hermione were both one step back from Goyle as all three cast a defensive shield. Goyle's filled the corridor and as the train in front shattered away his shield expanded to either side to join Harry's and Hermione's. But, as if being etched away by acid, the shields began to give way to the explosion now enveloping them. From afar, as Harry was told later, it looked like a large comet streaking down the tracks; their shield charms protecting everyone behind them. Finally, the fireball burned through the shield charm, reached the tip of Goyle's wand, and his shield failed. He was knocked backwards by the explosion into Hermione and Harry. As Harry felt the percussion of the blast, he watched as the fireball consumed Greg and then all was darkness.

Harry looked up into Dumbledore's grim face; his blue eyes bore a deep sadness. Looking down, Dumbledore simply shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Harry."

The young wizard could feel his blood turn cold; his heart skipped.

"And... and Hermione?" he asked not wanting to know the answer.

"She's fine, Harry," whispered Dumbledore and the air filled Harry's lungs again. "Quite a remarkable young woman, really. Unfortunately, Mr. Boot required immediate medical attention and now it's your turn." Dumbledore suspended a small silver sphere in front of Harry.

"Wait!" Harry yelled. "I can't... the... the stone. It's in my bag, in the carriage."

"There is no carriage, Harry," said Dumbledore dryly. "Hence, there is no bag; there is no stone."

Wincing again in pain, Harry turned to see the devastation scattered on the barren landscape. There was nothing but heaps of smoldering debris surrounded by squatting students, some worse off than others, but all alive. Thanks to the knowledge that something was about to happen, they all had their wands at the ready. "He has the stone," Harry whispered, dropping his head into the ashen earth.

“Perhaps, Harry... perhaps it has been destroyed. Now, please take the orb; we’ll talk later, but first we must tend to your leg.” Harry looked down to see bone poking out through the bottom of his right pants-leg. His jeans were soaked in blood, but the bleeding had stopped. Harry reached out with his right hand and was surprised to see it still clutching his wand. His shirtsleeve had been burned away and revealed the mark on his forearm. He cast Dumbledore a nervous glance.

“Later, Harry,” he said calmly. “Now take the orb.”

Harry touched it and felt the tug at his navel, the wind in his face, and a swirl of colour later he was on the cold hard floor of St. Mungo’s, his leg pointing in an awkward direction. He looked up to find Mad-Eye standing over him, wand drawn and magical eye spinning in all directions.

“That’s got to hurt, Potter,” he said gruffly. “A few more breaks like that and you’ll be on your way to being a real Auror for sure.”

“Honestly, sir,” said a healer reproachfully to Mad-Eye and advancing on Harry from the other side. Harry looked up at her.

“You know,” he said with a grimace, “padded floors wouldn’t hurt.”

She smiled. “Stay still.” She whispered an incantation, and Harry began falling into a dreamless sleep as he listened to Mad-Eye go on about how in his day....

His stay at the hospital was short, only a few days; Terry Boot was there a few more. He had sent post telling Gabriella what had happened, but her reaction to the loss of the stone was miniscule to her concern over his injury. She wanted to come and visit, but he was released and sent back to Hogwarts before she could make it. There would be no more late-night conversations with the mirrors again; his was in shards scattered with the debris along where once laid the tracks. Still, worry over the loss of the stone, and his sadness over not being able to see and speak with her during evening breaks was overshadowed by the loss of Greg Goyle. It was likely that none of them would be alive if Greg hadn’t stood in front, unflinching, to

protect them all. Those were the words Harry used at the memorial service held in the Great Hall at Hogwarts on Easter Sunday.

Many of Greg Goyle's family members were present, including his mother, but his father, wanted by the Ministry, was absent. The mood was glum as many in the hall were well aware of the turn-around Greg Goyle had been making, but as Harry stood at the front of the hall, speaking for Gryffindor, his tone was bright, energetic, and full of hope.

"There are no words that can describe the goodness of a soul capable of seeing past a history of hatred. There are no lights that can outshine the brilliance of a mind that gives itself willingly for the betterment of another. There are no dreams than can compare to the wonders of a world where all join together to stand against the darkness. These are the gifts of Gregory Goyle. He gave them freely for all to see; his steps set the standard for all who tread that path, however dangerous. His memory will forever be the touchstone of the dreams the Founders once had for this school. It is now up to us to see that he did not die in vain. It is now our turn to take up his wand and carry it forward into a future free of enmity."

"Many months ago, the giants knocked down these walls. What they couldn't destroy were the walls that we have built ourselves -- house against house; friend against friend. I have seen a great many things in the last few years, but perhaps the greatest moment of them all was the day I was able to call Greg Goyle friend. I only hope one day, when Greg and I meet again, we will look back on this day with fondness, for it marks a new beginning... a shining example of hope for the Wizarding world and all mankind."

As Harry made to his seat, a few claps began from about the students. They were followed by more and more until the entire hall was filled with applause and a rhythmic chant of "Goyle! Goyle! Goyle!" Harry sat down wondering what Greg's father would think. Dumbledore took to his feet smiling and holding out his hands to quiet the gathering.

"Kind words Mr. Potter. Thank you." He looked at a parchment through his half-moon spectacles. "Our last student speaker will be

Mr. Draco Malfoy, a close friend of Greg's since they first arrived at Hogwarts. Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco Malfoy stood and spoke of the purity of the Goyle line, reciting some ten generations of Goyles going back to Galimor Goyle who defended Britain against a Nordic invasion of half-blood mongrels. He ended on a Quidditch note.

"He was the best bloody Beater Hogwarts has ever seen and the team will be hard pressed to find a replacement." There was a moment of silence and then the Slytherin Quidditch team erupted in rousing applause and whistles. Hermione's eyebrows furled as she watched Malfoy leave the podium.

"I don't think he has a caring bone in his body," she said.

"Oh, he cares alright," said Ron. "He cares about himself."

There were more speeches, more prayers, and since Greg's body had been vaporized in the explosion a small plaque was placed on the Wall of Memories next to the plaque remembering Cedric Diggory. Harry couldn't help but think of how Emma had died, and explained away his dream of her after the explosion as a mixing of the two events.

"Harry," Hermione said softly after the ceremony had ended, "you look tired. Let's get you back to the common room." The trio made their way back together among a number of black robed Gryffindors.

"Could there be a group of more self-centered, glory seekers?" asked Ron, clearly referring to Slytherin House. "After the third pure-blood ancestor, I was ready to puke!" Ron's fists were curling at the end of his sleeves. He had not spoken much of his short friendship with Greg, but Harry noted that he had been hurt when Professor McGonagall selected Harry, not Ron, to provide Gryffindor's eulogy.

"And Crabbe," said Ron, now searing, "they were supposed to be friends, and all he did was pick his nose through the whole ceremony!" He went to hit the wall with the back of his hand and hit a

portrait of a flock of geese instead. The squawking followed them all the way to the portrait of the Fat Lady.

When they entered the common room, groups of Gryffindors were gathered around an announcement that had been posted. Ginny, still dressed in black, stepped back from the wall, her hand over her mouth in shock.

“Ginny,” Hermione asked in concern, “what is it?”

“Beauxbatons was attacked. They destroyed part of the school and we’re getting transfer students to help lighten the load. They arrive tomorrow.”

“We just got this place back together,” complained Ron. “Why can’t they just...”

“What else?” questioned Hermione, noting that the look on Ginny’s face was too severe to be caused by a transfer of students, whatever the cause.

“Dumbledore’s announced the inter-house transfers,” she said looking like she was ready to be sick.

“No!” cried Ron. “They’re not sending you to Slytherin are they?”

Ginny shook her head no, and then without saying a word she pointed a trembling finger back in Ron’s face.

“What?” he asked confused.

“Oh, no,” Hermione whispered.

“What?” he yelled suddenly enlightened. He pushed people out of the way as he dashed to read the announcement on the wall. “No!” he cried out again after reading his name next to the word Slytherin. “Why can’t Thomas go, or Potter?”

“Your family is as pure and old as any in Hogwarts, Ron,” Hermione answered in a calming voice. “It only makes sense that...”

"It doesn't make sense!" Ron yelled back. "I-I won't do it! That's all there is to it." He pulled his black cloak back up over his shoulders. "I'm telling Dumbledore right now!" He started for the door when the portrait opened and in walked Professor McGonagall. She noted the collection of students around the announcement on the wall.

"Ah, good," she said smartly, "you've seen the announcement."

"Good?" said Ron writhing in anger. "What's good about it?"

"I thought you might be disappointed Mr. Weasley, but..."

"Disappointed? DISAPPOINTED? I won't do it. Throw me out now because..."

"That will do, Mr. Weasley!" Her voice was raised and her face stern, and the look was enough to quiet any wizard down, let alone a sixth year Hogwarts student. "I expect better manners from the students in my house and you are in my house until tomorrow night. Ten points from Gryffindor." There was a collective groan.

"But..." Ron began.

"Come with me, Mr. Weasley." Again the words were tight and firm. Ron glanced at Harry, who was only thankful it wasn't him, as he walked out through the portrait.

"They'll kill him," Harry whispered.

"I'm sure he'll take a few down first," Dean added.

"You guys don't get it," interjected Seamus. "That's what it's all about... teh learn that we're not goin' teh kill each other fer bein' different."

"That's easy for you to say, Finnigan," shot Barbara McNulty. "Ravenclaw isn't filled with Death Eaters."

"Yeah," added another student, "they're bloody murderers is what they are."

"Killers, every one of them!"

"Self-centered..."

"STOP IT!" cried a voice from the corner by the fireplace. It was Parvati's. With the rapidity of events, few, if any, remembered that Parvati Patil and Greg Goyle had been dating. Seeing her reddened face and watering eyes Harry remembered that she was planning on visiting Greg for the holiday, but promised instead to help Professor Trelawney redecorate her classroom. She would have certainly been on the train at Greg's side had it been otherwise.

"Greg Goyle was a Slytherin!" said Parvati defiantly. "You Barbara, you gave him our house crest! Was it all a joke?" The room was dead silent as a wave of guilt enveloped all present. Even Harry, whose words had been so eloquent at the eulogy was taken aback. Parvati pulled her wand. "The next person who says one bad thing about Slytherin is going to answer to me! Do you understand? I'll hex you into the stone-age, and you'll crawl on your belly like a snake!" She stood there, wand stretched out, trembling in front of them all.

Both Lavender and Hermione went over, put their arms around her, and began to cry. Harry and Neville, and soon everyone surrounded Parvati apologizing and offering whatever support they could. In the midst of this circle of compassion and caring, Ron burst back in through the portrait ready to explode. His mouth opened wide ready to scream when a wave of emotion passed over his face. His mind was picking up the thoughts filling the room and his shoulders slumped in resignation.

Finally, everyone began to disperse. "It'll get better, Parvati," said Hermione as brightly as she could. "Tomorrow, a new day is born, and with it comes new hope."

"Thanks, Hermione," said Parvati wiping her eyes and trying to muster a smile.

Ron walked up to Harry and tapped him on the shoulder. "Mate, we need to talk." But Harry wasn't listening. He stood there frozen like a statue, his eyes fixed forward playing Hermione's words over in his mind.

"Tomorrow, a new day is born," he whispered to the air. For a moment, he paused, and then said louder and with a bit of a tremor, "I love to watch the sun being born anew." He turned to face Ron and held him by the shoulders. "That's it! From birth of light to death infernal." Ron stood completely clueless. "Birth of light... morning. I have to go to the falls in the morning. That's when they took me!"

"Who?" asked Ron trying to gather a quickly unraveling thread. "What falls?"

Harry suddenly realized he was speaking in front of the entire common room, although there was only one person paying any real attention... the bushy haired girl with brown eyes, but she pretended not to be listening.

"Er, nothing, Ron," said Harry. "Just some music lyrics to this new song I heard."

"Yeah? Who?"

Harry looked about. Hermione was wandering with no real purpose.

"Boy, I'm hungry," answered Harry. "You hungry? All this excitement... I need something to eat."

"Yeah," said Ron as if hypnotized by the mere suggestion, "food sounds good. I need to get my mind off of... of...."

"Yeah," Harry jumped in, "let's eat. Hermione, you want to eat?"

"What?" she asked looking up as if surprised by the question. "Eat? Sure."

Once out of their black robes, the three quickly departed and as they strolled down the corridor Harry asked Ron who he thought Gryffindor

should put in as Keeper... "You know, with you going to Slytherin and all." That night, Ron didn't eat much of anything, nor did he sleep well during his last night in the Gryffindor tower.

The next morning it was announced that the first day of classes would be canceled pending the transfer of the new students and to afford the inter-house exchanges to take place. Most everyone was ecstatic, except for Ron and a handful of other apprehensive transfer students leaving their houses. Harry spent the day seemingly distracted and Ron thought it was because he'd be leaving. Somehow, even though he was wrong, it made him feel better. As evening came, Ron packed his bags before they were called to the second sorting and what Ron called his "last supper".

"You know, mate," said Ron as he packed his things in his trunk, "it won't be so bad." He tried to keep his tone light, but the words carried no conviction. "I mean, Jim Chang's moving over to be in Slytherin this term; they accepted him, right?" There was no answer. "And... and it's just a couple months and all, RIGHT?" Ron raised his voice noticing Harry's lack of attention.

"Huh?" Harry asked. "Oh... yeah... couple months." Harry was lying on his bed looking up at the picture of Gabriella. Her face bore an expression of worry and anxiety. Something was wrong, Harry thought, but he had no mirror with which to contact her. Ron tossed the last pair of socks in his trunk and closed the lid.

"Yeah, a couple months." He swallowed. "You know, you could try Sloper at Keeper," he said trying to focus on something he cared about and the two let that conversation carry them down to the Great Hall. It ended when Professor Dumbledore stood at the head table and addressed the students.

"Tonight, we welcome within these walls old friends for some and for others new acquaintances that are sure to grow new friendships. Please open your hearts and your houses as I know you can. Professor?" Dumbledore turned to Professor McGonagall standing to the side of the hall. She walked across with the Sorting Hat and sat it on a lone chair in the front. It furred and sang:

Four houses dare to stand as one
against a dreaded foe.

Two schools must join as four have done,
and soon we all will know.

Come here to me the students new
and find where you will land

As Hogwarts waits to welcome you,
enjoy this moment grand!

"Not much, that," Seamus said behind his hand to Ron.

"Well, it hasn't had the whole year, has it?" answered Ron in the Sorting Hat's defense. "And besides, we just found out yesterday they were coming. He probably had to scrap the one he was working on."

"That's right," added Hermione, and the two began to clap and cheer, and almost for the fun of it the students in the Great Hall burst out with applause. They were thirsty for something to be happy about and the song was as good as anything. Finally, Professor McGonagall unrolled a rather short parchment and started to read.

"We begin with students from Beauxbatons Academy," she said. Harry wondered what that meant since they were all from Beauxbatons. Hermione seemed to have the same question.

"You don't think there are some students from Durmstrang do you?" she asked. Harry just shrugged his shoulders as Professor McGonagall called some twenty names.

"Alocette, Devon."

A tall, thin, pale boy looking about Harry's age walked from the side room, his nose so far up in the air that he nearly tripped over the chair. Adjusting his robes, he sat beneath the hat.

"Ridiculous," he whispered in a thick French accent as he closed his eyes.

"Oh, this is gonna be great," said Dennis Creevey as he rolled his eyes.

"Pure unity," Jim Chang whispered back.

Colin, sitting next to him, stood and took a picture as the Sorting Hat called out, "Ravenclaw!"

The applause from Ravenclaw was polite, but no more. Hardly a typical welcome given to a first year Hogwarts student.

Professor McGonagall worked her way down the list and as she did so the acceptance of the room was more pronounced and the greetings much warmer. When a large round boy named Peter Walreux with glasses much the same as Harry's was sorted to Gryffindor, the table stood and cheered.

"What year?" Neville asked as he shook the boy's hand.

"Sixth," he answered shyly.

"Me too!" Neville said with a grin, and offered him a place at the Gryffindor table.

"Guess he gets your bed," Harry whispered to Ron.

"He's huge! I'll need a new one when I come back next year," he paused glancing over at the Slytherin table, "if I live that long." It was strange; of the nearly two-dozen students sorted, only two had been sorted into Slytherin. It was clear that the Slytherin table which had spent much of the day insulting the Beauxbatons transfer students now found themselves feeling somewhat slighted.

Harry was looking at Ron trying to show concern for his friend when Professor McGonagall cleared her throat.

“And now, from Al Bsahri,” she said coolly. There were a few murmurs in the room.

“They closed Al Bsahri last year,” someone whispered.

“Some sort of plague.”

“Dozens died, and I heard that...”

Professor McGonagall deliberately cleared her throat, raised her voice, and added an edge that told the others to quiet down. “Darbinyan, Gabriella.”

Harry felt the air leave his lungs as Gabriella walked out in front of everyone in the Great Hall. Someone in the back of the hall let out a whistle and Harry began to stand to see who it was when Hermione took his arm. He hunched back down and watched as Professor McGonagall placed the hat on Gabriella’s head.

“She has to be a Gryffindor; I know it!” he whispered loudly.

“You wish, Potter,” jeered Ernie Macmillan under his breath.

Harry had half a mind to hex Ernie on the spot, when the Sorting Hat called out.

“Slytherin!”

The Slytherin table, which was beginning to sulk, broke out with the evening’s loudest round of cheers floating into the air; Harry’s heart sank. Gabriella walked over to the table scanning the room, but was unable to find Harry before she sat. Through the seated students, Harry’s eyes fell directly on Malfoy who was smiling malevolently back in his direction. Professor Dumbledore stood.

“Well, the best way to get to know each other is over food. Let’s eat!” A small banquet of food filled the tables with a distinct slant toward

French and Mediterranean. Ron looked at a stuffed olive leaf, sniffed it, then popped it in his mouth, nodding in approval and grabbing another.

"Well, at least I'll have someone to commiserate with," he mumbled as he chewed. "I'll keep an eye on her, mate. If I'm not dead." He grabbed some rolls with melted butter.

Finally, Harry could bear it no longer; he stood and their eyes met. He swung his leg over the bench with the full intention of walking to the Slytherin table when Hermione grabbed the back of his robes.

"Give her a minute to breathe, Harry," she whispered. "If you go over there now, they'll..." He pulled away ignoring her, ignoring everybody, and strode over next to Gabriella. She stood and they embraced to the hoots and howls of everyone within the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall looked crosswise at the pair over her spectacles, but Professor Dumbledore smiled broadly.

"You didn't tell me," breathed Harry. "When... when did you decide?" She held her hand to his face.

"Minister Weasley paid a visit to our house the other day. Even though Mama's well, I didn't want to leave her alone. He offered to have someone stay with her for awhile, and Mama said it was time to get a proper education. So..." she shrugged looking at the sea of green around her, "here I am." Harry hugged her again looking at the same sea of green.

"There are a lot of good people in Slytherin," he said trying as best he could to suppress any feelings to the contrary. "It's a good house. I'll... I'll let you get to know them and we can talk later, okay?"

Gabriella nodded, kissing his cheek and sat back down. Harry cast a quick glance at Malfoy who had deliberately ignored his presence at the table the whole time he was there. Finally, he walked back to the Gryffindor table and finished eating.

"Did anybody ask about me?" Ron asked. "You know... me going to Slytherin tonight and all."

“Erm, sure Ron,” Harry answered. “Malfoy was torn between hexing you into some vegetable thing, or keeping you whole to play Keeper.” Ron just glared at Harry.

“My life’s on the line and all you can do is tell jokes.” He grabbed another roll and stuffed it in his mouth.

When dinner ended Harry tried to meet with Gabriella, but found himself caught behind a large group of Hufflepuffs. It was all he could do not to shove them all aside and rush up to meet her. Just when he thought he’d burst, there was a sudden commotion from up ahead. Someone cried out, there was a cheer, screams, and then Adrian Pucey of Slytherin came flying over the heads of the Hufflepuffs landing at Harry’s feet. His nose had seriously moved to a new part of his face and was bleeding badly. Pucey looked up at Harry and, to the Gryffindor’s surprise, smiled.

“Dat’s one hell ub a woban you got der, Podder,” said Pucey with a grin that revealed two missing teeth in front. A moment later, Tracey Davis was helping him to his feet.

“Just had to get cute, didn’t you Adrian?” she scolded. “Now look at you! If you can’t help me with my Potions homework tonight, I’m going to kill you.”

Harry looked back at the opening that had split the Hufflepuff’s to either side of the corridor. There stood Slytherin Daphne Greengrass, her arm consolingly around Gabriella’s shoulder. Daphne was shaking her head and waved her hand in the air as if to say not to worry about it. Harry’s girlfriend glared back at Adrian as Tracey escorted him to the hospital wing and a shiver ran down his spine. Her jaw was set and her eyes on fire. What would it take, he wondered, for her to kill again?

Chapter 65 - The Black Key

The sky was blue, the air was warm, and the sun was bright. The breeze carried upon its breath the fresh scent of just blossomed wild flowers, and Harry's ears were tuned to the birds chirping in the air... a sound of love. Could there be a more beautiful day? He leaned against the wall, folded his arms and continued to gaze upon the dark haired girl in green robes some ten paces to the fore. All was right with the world, and it would soon be...

"Well, Mr. Potter?" a voice in the distance pinged into Harry's mind.

It had been a few weeks and already he was happier than he could imagine. Gabriella, having missed so much school, was placed with the sixth year students. Pucey's face reconstruction had instantly earned Gabriella a rep: Terminator. And although she had endured the occasional hexes and pranks all new students endured, since her arrival she had, for the most part, got on well with the rest of Slytherin. While her family wasn't rich, they were well off and their genealogical lines in the Wizarding world ran deep. When it was discovered that her father was the best-man at Headmaster Gillman's wedding (a wizard known to be connected in the circles of dark magic), and her mother's mother was an aid to the dark lord Pravus himself, none again questioned her purity or value to the Slytherin name. These small facts were presented by none other than Draco Malfoy, who now stood at her side in the small hamlet of Hogsmeade -- something that would have made Harry's skin crawl, but for the fact that at her other side stood Ron Weasley, distinctly out of place in green robes.

"Mr. Potter!" This time the small voice of Professor Flitwick pressed Harry bodily against the wall. He looked down at the wizard now glaring up at him. "Do you have an answer?" Flitwick's voice pitched higher than normal, a sign that he was irritated.

"Answer, sir?"

"Five points from Gryffindor," Flitwick chided, and the collection of red robes groaned in unison.

"Honestly, Harry," said Seamus trying to be supportive but clearly a bit knitted, "if yeh don' snap out of it soon, we're gonna lock yeh away with Lockhart."

"Finnigan's right," added Dean, "even I knew the answer to that question, and I'm as thick as Hagrid is wide when it comes to apparation."

"Leave him alone," injected Pavarti -- support that Harry wasn't sure he wanted. "Harry's in love." Hearing this, Seamus just rolled his eyes.

"That's right, Finnigan" added Lavender with a splash of indignation, and then turning to Harry she said in an overly sweet voice, "I think it's sweet."

"Anyone else?" snapped Professor Flitwick. "Describe the three phases of apparation. Come now, this should be simple review." Gabriella lifted her hand. "Yes... yes, Ms. Darbinyan..."

"Vision, Pathway, Reconstruction"

"Yes, nicely done," he said brightly. "Ten points for Slytherin." The Gryffindor group groaned again. They were in third place for the house cup and days were running out. "Though here at Hogwarts we describe them as Vision, Channel, and Reconstruction." Gabriella nodded taking note as she flashed Harry a smug smile.

Harry could hear her voice ringing in his ears: What do they teach you at that school? It was enough to flare his temper, and he wondered if the reason Gabriella was so well accepted in Slytherin was because, perhaps, her father was a Death Eater. He stood erect hoping to put his head back where it belonged.

"Professor?" asked Harry, and Flitwick turned to face him. "It's nearly the end of the year, and we've only apparated across the street. When do we..."

"I'm glad you asked," Flitwick interrupted. "Today we will apparate from within the Three Broomsticks to an open area staged out on the street." There was a general murmur of excitement. To some the idea

of apparating through a wall was quite frightening and they had dreaded this moment for awhile, for others it was a thrill of a lifetime. Harry wasn't sure which camp he fell in. In theory, the wall's presence made no difference, but that was of no consolation to Harry who had disliked apparation from the start.

First, the students went to a square area some five yards to a side set right in the middle of the street. It was always easier to apparate to a place you'd been already. Here in the street, if their apparations were misguided, at least they wouldn't materialize in a wall. Neville, having missed most of the first term had always felt somewhat behind. In the last class he pushed too hard and when he took his turn to apparate across the street, he found his feet some six inches below the ground. The feeling, as he put it, was quite painful; something akin to running his feet through a meat grinder one way, then back through the other as his body kept trying to reconstruct itself. His feet recovered fully, but Neville's mettle to apparate had diminished somewhat.

As always when apparating for the first time in a new way, students took the hand of a wizard or witch that was already licensed. While it didn't help much with vision or reconstruction, it did help to create the channel of space and time through which they traveled. Usually, there were always willing volunteers in Hogsmeade, and today was no exception.

Harry watched as student after student apparated from the Three Broomsticks and out onto the street without incident. With each appearance of a pair, a new cheer filled the air. Gabriella had been one of the first to travel, having apparated for some time in Lebanon without a license.

Finally, Hermione and a wizard from town went with a snap, followed by Harry who held the hand of Madam Rosmerta the shop's owner.

"Are you scared, Harry?" she asked smiling at him.

"No," he lied, but his eyes had already given him away.

"Focus on standing next to that pretty girl of yours out there, and you won't have a problem."

Harry squeezed his eyes, nodded his head, and held his wand at the ready.

“Vision...” she began.

“Channel...” Harry continued. A doorway opened, past the walls and onto the street. Harry felt himself being sucked through to the street; he imagined it was much the same sensation as being sucked out into space through a hole in a spaceship.

“Reconstruction,” they thought together, and both appeared out on the street.

Knees a bit wobbly, Harry arrived to a small cheer, and waved his hand trying to look calm and collected, though his insides were still squirming.

“Very nice, Harry,” said Rosmerta, patting him on the back. “Good luck on the next go.”

“Next go?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Flitwick. “The class will now apparate solo from the same positions.” Harry’s insides squirmed a bit more. He would much prefer flying than this. “Come on, everyone; back inside!”

A few students, such as Ron, raced to the front to be first to go; Gabriella gave Harry a little pinch for dawdling as she passed him on her way into the Three Broomsticks with Blaize. Again, Harry found himself at the end of the line with Hermione, only this time the line was moving much slower as some students were having difficulty leaving at all. Still outside, Hermione looked at Harry and nodded her head toward the side of the building, beckoning him to follow; he did.

“Ron tells me,” she began with some trepidation, “that you’ve had no more dreams, no more voices; is that true?”

"Yeah, I guess," said Harry with a shrug. "I mean, I can still feel his anger like when those two Death Eaters were caught escorting a pair of giants westward outside of Dresden in Germany." He looked at her curiously. "Why?" he asked glancing around the corner to see students still waiting outside to get in. There was a small scream as Pansy Parkinson materialized in the street without her arms -- splinched. Professor Flitwick hurried outside followed by Nott who was carrying her arms in his hands.

"Serves her right," Hermione said with a sneer. Then she too looked about a bit apprehensive of their location.

"I think it's safe, don't you?" she asked. "Safe to tell you what I've been doing."

"Here?" Harry asked, eagerly wanting to hear everything, but knowing this was not the spot to be talking about work for the Order.

"I'm talking about you, Harry!" she snapped. "Is it safe or isn't it!"

"Yeah... yeah, it's safe, but..."

"Take my hand."

"What?"

"Take... my... hand!"

"Alright, but..." he placed his hand in hers.

"Do you remember where we first saw Peter Petigrew?" The memory was as vivid as any Harry had. Seeing the look of hatred fill Harry's eyes, Hermione did not wait for an answer as she drew her wand.

Instantly, a portal opened up before them; on the other side was the Shrieking Shack. They passed through the channel; Harry's stomach lurched as they reconstructed with a loud pop on the other side. He knew she was good, but he didn't think she could travel this far.

"You can apparate," he said dully. "How long?"

"I decided, after Germany, that it would never happen again. I began to study some... well, a lot." For Hermione, those words meant something. "I can apparate a few yards without using my wand now." Her eyes grew a bit cold. "No one will ever hold me in their arms again, unless I want them to."

Harry had to sit down. He learned from Dumbledore that she'd been helping develop... "Apparation tracking?" he asked. "For the Order?" He sat on a broken and dusty chair in the corner of the room.

"Well, I've been showing some members how it's supposed to work," Hermione answered. "But only Dumbledore and Ron know that I can fully apparate. And only Dumbledore knows that I can track an apparation better than anyone, at least as far as here to London."

"London?" Harry gulped.

Hermione nodded her head, in that really it's no big deal sort of way.

"So... so you HAVE been working for the Order," accused Harry. "All summer? Where do they..."

"No, Harry, not the Order," cut in Hermione. "I'm not old enough. Besides, you're not working for the Order when you're investigating one of their members."

"Tonks," said Harry sharply without hesitation. The name carried with it a tinge of anger -- anger directed at Hermione.

"I was asked because she's given everyone else the slip, Harry." His eyes were glaring at her. "She's not the youngest Auror in Britain for nothing."

"And she's not a Death Eater!" he shrieked; Hermione remained calm. She needed to tell him, to show him, and she didn't have much time.

"Harry, she's been meeting with Mr. Darbinyan since the summer. First, on Privet Drive and now... now in London. I think he has her under his control. He's the one that provided her the clues to work the

golden instrument, and she's been using you to help her. I don't know what he's after, but I know he could care less about freeing Sirius. He's probably trying to help Voldemort release the criminals behind the curtain." She took a step toward him as Harry sat with his head in his hands. "He's probably a..."

"Snape's been to the Darbinyan's!" Harry yelled looking up at her. "Does that make him a Death Eater too?" The words landed on the floor, and the two left them there not sure where they should go. Finally, Hermione spoke.

"Harry, I know you want to save Sirius, but you can't trust Tonks, and you can't trust Gabriella's father." Harry narrowed his eyes at Hermione.

"So I shouldn't trust Gabriella either, is that what you're saying?"

"I didn't say that," said Hermione, her voice raising more than she wanted. "Look, let's work it together. Just tell Tonks... tell her you quit. Then the Order can work with you to get Sirius out, you'll see." Harry stood from his chair, seeing all too well.

"Tell me, Hermione, will the Order try to kill a few Voldemort's followers so I can bring them back from near death?" She looked at him quizzically. "No, I didn't think so." He looked at the spot where Peter Petigrew begged for his life, the spot where Harry had made a decision he now... he now regretted. He would not make the same mistake; he would not let such an opportunity pass again. "If the Ministry gets their nose into it, do you think they'll give the green light to cast the Unforgivable Curse so I can bring the dead back to life?" A smile split his face... a smile of irony. "We all do so want to save Sirius Black, don't we? I wonder? I wonder what the papers would say, if he could come back from the dead... friend or foe?" The words were directed squarely at the girl before him, and she took them for what he meant.

"You know the answer to that, Harry. At least, I hope you do."

Harry wondered. He didn't mean to, but still he wondered. Was his friend trying to talk to him right now, or someone... someone he didn't

even know? He turned to the blackened window deciding to drop all his cards. He would see where her loyalties lay.

“Tonks has Malfoy’s blood. It’s an ingredient I... we need to bring back Sirius. Without Tonks, it can’t be done. If she’s under the Imperius Curse why not have Dumbledore...” he paused. If there was ever any doubt, certainly Dumbledore or someone from the Ministry would have cured Tonks months ago. He spun back to face Hermione.

“Why don’t you want her cured?” Hermione looked away. This time the gears in Harry’s mind turned. “She’s a link to Darbinyan...” he began, “but you want the link to Voldemort.” Harry shook his head at the idea; it made no sense. With Snape, the Order already had a link to Voldemort. He walked closer to her. “Who is it, Hermione? Who is Darbinyan going to lead you to with Tonks’ help?”

This time it was Hermione’s turn to sit on the dusty chair. Setting her own cards out on the table, she said quietly, “It’s rumored that a witch came with Mr. Darbinyan to London -- a very powerful witch.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Soseh doesn’t have an evil...”

“Not his wife, Harry, someone older than Voldemort himself. Many thought her long dead, but the killing sprees around the world... they’re the same as centuries ago. Whole villages wiped out for no reason, innocents killed for no purpose. She kills for pure pleasure, and she’s returned to England to be at Voldemort’s side.”

“That’s rich, Hermione,” said Harry with a quiver of uncertainty in his voice, “but it’s a rumor, nonetheless. How on earth can you tie together an astronomy professor to a centuries old murderous dark witch?” His mind was firmly fixed on the black haired girl now in Hogsmeade, and his pulse began to quicken. Was it possible that...

“They think Grigor was the best man at her wedding to Headmaster Gillman,” said Hermione. At these words, Harry remembered to breathe again. Still, he was confused, and Hermione could see it in his eyes.

"She disappeared only weeks before the Headmaster was found murdered. They think she was the black death of Al Bsaehri." Harry glared at Hermione with a look she knew to be disbelief. "I know it's a stretch, Harry, but that's why we're watching. Snape tried to watch, but Tonks caught on. With me... well she doesn't know I can track her when she apparates." Hermione took, Harry by the arm. Her eyes were filled with concern and, Harry knew, friendship. "I only want you to be safe, Harry. I swear!"

"What... what's her name?" Harry asked. "What's the name of this... this dark plague?"

"She has many, Harry. Professor Dumbledore tells me that about the world she's known as Anaxarete, but when she was last in Great Britain, watching the green of Ireland turn brown, she was called Ana... Ana Slate." Harry fell back in a chair, and a cloud of dust filled the room. He tried to breathe in, but the dust only made him cough.

Harry sat silent, breathing in the stale air that only a moment ago had smelled so sweet. He had wanted the truth; now, could he handle it? Thoughts and dreams which floated like separate facets of a large jewel began to coalesce in Harry's mind: Duncan's words, "...pure magic. Ask Em! She's special too. Eh, Em? Well, Em knows. We're bound by thorns..."; piercing green eyes; no body found, "It's sick is what it is."

Still, it was too far fetched to think that Emma, Emma Slate was responsible. Surely Gabriella would know, but then perhaps not. A witch older than Voldemort would have many ways of disguise. Gabriella had not used her gift to read Harry's mind because she swore an oath not to use her magic; nor would she have used it on Emma. The jewel in Harry's mind was more quartz than diamond; his thoughts were not that fast, but the girl sitting across from him could spin her ideas faster than Aragog could spin a web.

"Hermione," he said watching a spider at his side weave a web around a freshly caught fly, "this summer in Little Whinging I met an Emma Slate. She was close with Gabriella. She was killed, at least we thought she was, in the explosion in Paris."

“Harry, I doubt...”

“Tell Dumbledore that she may have been in Little Whinging all summer.”

“Maybe she came first, and the Darbinyans followed,” conjectured Hermione.

“I need to think more about this,” Harry cut in standing from the chair and dusting himself off. “We need to think more about this. On the train, before the explosion, I thought I saw her.”

“The witch... with the green eyes?” Hermione asked with surprise. Harry nodded.

“We need to get back before we’re missed,” Harry said as he held out his hand. “Thank you for telling me.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Hermione, taking his hand, but Harry did not respond.

As the vision of the Three Broomsticks came to view and the channel was opened, Harry whispered, “Tonks is not a Death Eater; I know it.”

A moment later, they were back at the side of the Three Broomsticks. When they came about the corner, they noticed that Pansy Parkinson was put back together and that most the class had apparated to the target square. Neville suddenly appeared and was greeted to a warm cheer. The first thing he did was look at his feet firmly planted above the earth’s surface. Professor Flitwick poked his head out the door.

“There you are!” he called. “Come on, you’re next.”

Hermione apparated to the target with ease; Harry’s stomach, however, was tied in knots. Finally, he cast the spell only to find himself some two feet above the earth when he reconstructed. He fell hard to the earth to the sound of cheers and laughter, but he’d twisted his ankle and it hurt. He cursed at the dirt beneath him as Gabriella came to his side and helped him to his feet.

"You hurt your ankle; can you walk?" she asked. Harry took a few steps; the ankle was fine, but he hobbled pretending to fall and she caught him. In her ear he whispered, "Tonight, at eight." Gabriella nodded as she dusted his robes with her hand, a bit too forcefully for Harry's taste, but it garnered some smiles from the Slytherins.

The students followed Professor Flitwick back to Hogwarts on foot, practicing Vision along the way. About halfway between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts the ability to see a place to apparate to became more and more difficult. Just outside the front gates it became impossible.

"It was Gryffindor who selected this part of the country over a thousand years ago," began Professor Flitwick. "First, because of its remoteness from Muggle eyes, and second because of the tremendous magical forces that emanate from the nearby forest. The forest holds untold magical creatures and its source of magic is so intense that even at this great distance the ability to apparate is rendered impossible. So is it also with all sorts of electronic instruments from the Muggle way of life, and since Muggles have become so dependent on their gadgets, they rarely venture into these environs -- a bonus that not even Rowena Ravenclaw had envisioned."

"The Forbidden Forest," Flitwick continued, "is forbidden because of the great and dangerous creatures that live there." Ron cast Harry a knowing look. "It is also forbidden because of the strange and sometime unpredictable effects it can have on the magic cast inside. Mr. Weasley's father's car still roams the forest at night. Sometimes you can see its headlights flashing in the treetops."

"The Centaurs are the only civil creatures that dwell within the forest. Perhaps, they are unaffected because they choose not to draw the energy required for magic from the environment in which they live. Instead, they use it in its raw form: arrows made of magical wood, bows strung with magical plants, and spells cast by drawing energy directly from the earth through all four of their feet. It is a closer bond to nature than wizards, goblins or elves have... perhaps a better one." He shrugged his shoulders as they continued on their way to the castle. "You'll never see a Centaur on concrete."

They arrived just in time for dinner. Hermione went to ask Ron if he wanted to join her after, but he couldn't.

"Quidditch practice and all," he said.

"Quidditch?" both Hermione and Harry cried out simultaneously for very different reasons.

"Well, it's keeping me alive. They want me in as Keeper, and I said..."

"I thought you'd finally have your evenings free," complained Hermione.

"But," said Harry scandalized, "Slytherin plays Gryffindor this term."

"You think I don't know that?" Ron shot back, looking over his shoulder. "It's bad enough I have to wear green, that I had to give up my house signet, and that I have to listen to the constant, pointed complaints about the Minister. But to fly with Crabbe and Malfoy out on the pitch... it's ruined the only thing I ever loved."

Now it was Hermione who was scandalized. Her eyes narrowed, but Ron was unable to take in what was wrong. "Well!" she huffed, spun on her heels and headed away. Ron looked at Harry.

"What? What did I say?"

"The only thing you ever loved?" Harry asked.

"And? Oh. OH! Hermione, wait!" he yelled, and ran off after her, his green robes billowing in the wind behind him. Harry turned just in time to see Gabriella on a sliding staircase with Pansy Parkinson as they made their way to Slytherin. She looked back at him and held up eight fingers.

Through dinner and after, Harry kept count on his own fingers until it was time to raise the eighth. When Gabriella walked into the classroom, she saw more fear on his face than happiness. It was an expression she had not been expecting.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I know you and Hermione haven’t really been on the best of terms,” Harry began. “You were right, she’s been following me and she’s been following Tonks all year. I don’t know why, but Tonks has been meeting... with your father.”

“What?” asked Gabriella incredulously. “I think I would know if...”

“Let me just tell you what Hermione said,” Harry interrupted. When it’s over... let’s talk, okay?” Gabriella agreed, and Harry began telling the story that Hermione had told him, and adding what pieces he knew, like believing he saw Emma... Emma Slate on the train before it blew. When he finished, Gabriella was mortified.

“That... that’s not possible,” she said, not sure she believed her own words.

“Gabriella,” Harry asked holding her hand close, “she was wooing Duncan to be her next sacrifice, that’s how she gets her kicks, that’s how she’s lived all these years... by killing Muggles to take their life energy.”

“Emma’s dead, Harry,” said Gabriella, still holding uncertainty in her voice. Harry squeezed her hand warmly, and pulled her close.

“Gab... I think she’s the old witch that was at the altar. I think she killed Antreas to take his life force.” In his, her hand began to tremble. “Your father didn’t come to Little Whinging because of me, Gabriella. I think he came to Little Whinging because of Anaxarete, Ana Slate... Emma.” Gabriella said nothing trying to search her mind for any hint of truth to what Harry was saying. And then something crossed her face and she held her hand to her mouth in a small gasp.

“What?” Harry asked.

“The arguments,” whispered Gabriella. “Sometimes they would argue about silly things like cleaning up about the house... but other times... they would argue about the Heart of Asha, the paths of the dead, and the black key... ways to bring back trapped spirits. Mama

refused to let him have the stone and it infuriated him. He swore he'd find a way, but I never understood what he meant." Her eyes looked up to Harry, tinged with fright. "He's a Death Eater?" she asked herself out loud. "Could he have wanted to give the Heart to the Dark Lord?"

"Then why Tonks?" Harry asked shaking his head. "She never once asked me about the stone. It doesn't make sense. All she wants is...." Harry stopped himself short. "A key? They argued about a black key?"

"Yes," answered Gabriella. "A key father took from Al Bsahri, fabled to open the path to the dead. Mama would yell he should send it to the depths."

One by one, the cogs in Harry's mind began to lock into place like tumblers on a Gringotts vault. She had given it back to him to study the engravings on its side in hopes that he would have more to go on. She had dismissed the falls in her own mind, but Harry knew that was where the answer lay, in the middle of the Forbidden Forest at the break of day. Even now Tonks held little hope of success, while now, more than ever, Harry knew she was wrong. He slipped the gold tube, his Christmas present, from his pocket and held it in front of Gabriella.

"This key?" he asked, hoping the answer would be no, but knowing otherwise. The look on Gabriella's face stood somewhere between shock and horror as she staggered backwards, supporting her weight against one of the desks so that she wouldn't fall.

Gabriella had calmed by the time Harry had explained the riddle and the basin, and the special key that fit the golden instrument in the Black family study.

"I always wondered," she whispered, "why they would call it the black key. I thought because of its black magic." She almost smiled to herself, but stopped short. "Papa wanted to release the dead for the Dark Lord."

"And somehow discovered Tonks had access to the Black family instruments," added Harry.

"And has held her under his spell, to do his bidding." There was a long pause before Harry shook his head, no, still not wanting to believe she was under anyone's spell.

"If that were true, then he came to Little Whinging because of me," he said, "because I would be surrounded by wizards and witches with access to the Black estate. But he didn't. I know he didn't." Harry thought back to the handful of times he met with Grigor. "And I know he isn't a Death Eater, Gabriella." She looked up curiously at him. "I just do."

"Are you going to tell Professor Dumbledore?" she asked, fearful of the answer that would make her father a criminal.

"I'm sure he already knows," Harry said. "They don't want your father, Gabriella. They want Anaxarete. As much as Hermione tries to stop me, the Ministry wants this to go ahead. That's why Dumbledore hasn't mentioned it to me. They want the next move to be played."

"And what move is that?"

"To open the curtain," said Harry standing, "or at least to try." It was getting late, and they would need to return soon. "But to do that, I need to get to the falls without being seen, and I think I know the perfect time."

"But if Hermione's right and it's all a ruse to release criminals back into the Dark Lord's service..."

"Grigor is not a Death Eater!" Harry said emphatically. "And neither is Tonks!"

Without saying another word, Harry extinguished the candles in the classroom and pulled her close. Normally in such an embrace both would close their eyes, but not this night. Tonight their eyes were wide, fearful in anticipation of what would happen to their loved ones. They kissed goodbye in the darkness before he opened the door to the corridor... a warm, tender kiss filled with sadness. In a moment they would separate, each heading a different direction. Neither of

them could see the way ahead clearly; neither of them could predict the future. But they knew one thing: they had each other and, for tonight at least, that was more than enough.

Chapter 66 - A Tiger's Stripes

In the darkness, Harry watched and waited as the hours slowly ticked by in the Gryffindor common room. He watched as all his dorm-mates fell asleep, including Peter Walreux now snoring in the bed across from Harry's. Peter wasn't too bad; he was quiet and spent most of his time with Neville, which was fine with Harry. The last few weeks since he and Gabriella formed today's plan Harry didn't much want to speak with anyone. He would play his part in this game and see where it led with but one goal in mind -- to bring back Sirius from beyond the Curtain of Phenolem. An hour before the break of day, the very day Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were set to play their Quidditch match, Harry rose and slipped out of bed. Quietly he dressed, took a small pack, his invisibility cloak and broom, and descended the staircases to the front doors of the castle.

With luck, he would gather the water today, and during the match give Tonks everything she needed to bring Sirius back. Hidden beneath the invisibility cloak, he was about to make his way out the front doors when he heard a rustling toward the entrance to the Great Hall. He stopped to listen more carefully, but heard nothing, then just as he turned to the doors once more he heard it again. Unable to resist the temptation, he went to have a look. When he came to the doors of the Great Hall, he wasn't sure what he felt. This, he knew, was a problem. There was an overwhelming urge to leave, to sneak through the front doors and be on his way with what needed to be done, but courage and friendship took control and held him fast.

Stuck to the closed doors and hexed with a silencing charm was Ron Weasley, coloured in some sort of Red and Gold paint -- a poor attempt at tiger stripes. Only it wasn't paint, the colour was his skin, and there was a lot of it. Ron was naked. The only thing he wore were blazing eyes, and a note that read, "Gryffindor Spy" placed in a prudent position. Harry watched as he rustled to pull himself free and failed again. Harry imagined what the scene would be at breakfast if he left him there, particularly on a Quidditch day with so many guests arriving. Finally, he took off his invisibility cloak causing Ron to recoil for an instant. An instant after that, Ron was on the floor covered with a cloak conjured up by Harry and ready to release a voice that wanted to scream, though Harry hushed him.

"I'll kill them," he hissed.

"What happened.?" Harry asked.

"Nott... and Parkinson." Ron was steaming as he fumbled with pulling the cloak over his bare shoulders. "They said they needed help in History of Magic, and would I go with them to the library. Damn it, I knew better! I never made it up the first flight of stairs. The immobilus hex just wore off. Thank Merlin you found me before..." Ron turned to look at Harry. "What are you doing up this early?"

Harry paused, and considered for a moment that he was talking to the boyfriend of Hermione Granger, but at this point it didn't much matter. Gabriella had that covered if it was necessary.

"Going for a morning fly," Harry said holding his broom. "Should be nice this time of night over the forest."

"Hermione said you'd do it. She wouldn't say why, just that you'd be sneaking off."

"She was right," said Harry taking to his feet. "Are you off to tell her? If you are, I should be back in about an hour. If the match has started and I haven't returned, I guess you two should tell somebody, but I'll probably be dead by then so I wouldn't bother. It'd just spoil the game."

"You're not going into the forest alone."

"More like over it Ron," whispered Harry, brandishing his broom as he walked back toward the front doors, Ron on his heels.

"I'm coming with you!"

"Quiet," Harry hissed. "I can't conjure a whole new set of clothes, and you don't have your broom, and you should go to the hospital ward to get those stripes removed."

"I'm coming with you."

Harry looked at the eyes staring back at him. He would lose this battle and he didn't have time for it.

"Fine," he said, "hop in." He held up his cloak and Ron climbed under. "But if some Threstral takes you for some sort of flying tiger and wants to be your boyfriend, I'm leaving you behind."

Outside there was only one Ministry guard by the door. When it opened, he moved to see who was inside. Ron and Harry slipped by before the guard shrugged, thinking it the wind, and closed the door again. By that time, Ron and Harry were already in the air on their way to the falls.

Over the darkened treetops, Harry didn't try to explain the water; he figured Ron already knew. Instead, he let Ron do the talking about his time in Slytherin.

"I can just about tolerate every one of them in that hellhole," said Ron in disgust. "It's just those two: Nott and Parkinson. They're as thick as Malfoy is with Vol-Voldemort," he spat out, "and twice as nasty."

"What? You can tolerate Malfoy?" asked Harry. "How's that?"

"We stay clear of each other, I guess. I don't know; I don't think we've said ten words to each other since I've been there, which is fine by me." He stopped talking and stewed for a moment. "Maybe he's afraid I'll read his mind and know where You-Know-Who is. But I swore to myself I wouldn't do it; that was a mistake that won't happen again."

Suddenly the forest opened up below the pair, and revealed the falls below. Even in the dim light of morning, the sight was spectacular.

"Is that incredible or what?" said Harry with a smile.

"What?" Ron asked.

"Don't you see it? Don't you see the falls?"

"I see trees. Where are the falls?" Ron was looking all around, but clearly seeing nothing. Harry pointed with one finger touching Ron's shoulder with the other. Suddenly, the falls were revealed before him.

"Blimey!" Ron exclaimed, unable to say more. Harry dropped the broom low, and settled it down near the largest pool of water. Ron simply gawked in amazement as he looked high above to the source of the roaring water. "It's spectacular."

The air was cool here, and the spray of falls crashing into the small pool filled the air with a thin mist. Harry pulled a potions bottle from his pack, a little smaller than the size of his hand, and looked at Ron. "What do you think," he asked holding up the vial, "about ten gallons?"

"Yeah," Ron nodded, "'bout."

Harry tapped the vial with his wand, and bent low to the water's edge. Ready to dip the vial in, he hesitated; memories of dreams pulling him into the water filled his mind instead. The thought of losing another three days to walk, or swim with the dead, or whatever it was he did the last time when he was tossed bodily into the water was not very appealing.

"It's just water, Harry," said Ron with a grin, not truly appreciating Harry's concern. Harry pulled back from the water, and stood surveying the scene. There was not a living sound except for the two wizards at the water: no birds, no squirrels, no giant spiders.

"Here," said Ron grabbing the small flask from Harry's hand, "I'll do it." Before Harry could stop him, he bent low to the water...

"Ron, stop!"

... and plunged in his hand. Nothing happened.

"Wait for what?" asked Ron, looking back over his shoulder.

Harry felt stupid as he watched Ron, slowly fill the bottle with ten gallons of water. "Nothing," he said sheepishly. But then Ron cocked his head.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"All I hear is the water," answered Harry.

"It was a voice," Ron said, "I'm sure." He was looking back at Harry, his hand still in the water when Harry noticed the water begin to swirl. "Something about..."

"Ron," he exclaimed, pointing at the water.

Ron looked down and also saw the water swirling about his hand. Instinctively, he pulled away, but a swirl of water like a branch of Devil's Snare had wrapped around Ron's wrist and held him tight.

"Ron?" Harry yelled excitedly.

"It won't... let... go!" cried Ron. "Who is that talking?" he asked, but Harry could hear nothing.

Now the swirl of water began to creep up Ron's arm like a vine curling around a branch. Harry was distinctly reminded of the green ice cream cone that ran up Malcolm Smelt's arm last summer. Harry reached around Ron's waist from behind and pulled, but it was no use; the water held fast. There was a great lurch and Ron, still striped orange and red, was pulled into the water leaving Harry with nothing but the cloak he'd conjured for him earlier.

"Ron!" he screamed, but there was no sign of the redhead. Even the water was still as if not so much as a pebble had broken its surface. A glint flickered into the corner of Harry's eye. He looked down to see the glass potions flask on the ground spilling water in a slow steady stream. Ignoring it, Harry plunged into the water to find his friend.

Once again, a voice filled his head, "Love harbors no enemies; The sword defends, it does not attack; Embrace the world, and you will be welcomed; Champion these precepts, and be cleansed." In that

moment he realized the words, the voice, was his own and as he did so Ron appeared before him in the water, his fiery hair swirling about in the currents. Ron's eyes were closed when Harry grabbed him and began to struggle toward the water's surface, but try as he might he was getting no closer to freedom. If anything he was being pulled deeper into the water.

Finally, with his thoughts, Harry asked to the water, "Please, set us free."

"The bonds that tie you are your own."

There was a snap and he found himself on the water's edge with Ron prone on the ground. Neither of them were wet. Ron gasped for air and filled his lungs as he pushed himself up on his elbows.

"Who was...? What was...?" he breathed.

At about the same time, both Ron and Harry noticed that the stripes of orange and red that earlier had covered Ron's body were now gone. Ron spun to see Harry looking down on him.

"Did you...?" he asked, but Harry shook his head no.

Harry looked down on Ron's back and noticed the freckles, freckles he hadn't seen all year because of all the red scarring that was now gone. The weaving branches that had stretched down from the nape of Ron's neck like a thicket of thorns had disappeared. All that remained was the small circular swirl on Ron's neck; its shape reminded Harry of a Yin-Yáng symbol.

"Ron," Harry began with a slightly unsteady voice, "your back... the scars, they're gone."

"What?" Ron asked in disbelief. He stood up and turned his head to try and see over his shoulder, spinning naked on the muddy bank like a dog trying to chase its tail. Finally, he stopped and reached with his hand, and his eyes opened with a look of surprise and unimaginable joy. Harry walked over and retrieved the cloak that lay against a rock that was just catching the rising sun.

"Here," he said, handing Ron the cloak to cover himself. Ron slipped it on and looked up at the great falls and into the pool.

"What is this place, Harry?" he asked in awe.

"I think it's the heart of Hogwarts, Ron," he answered. "Flitwick mentioned the source of energy was in the heart of the forest, and I think this is it." Again a glint of sunlight caught his eye and he looked down to see the potions bottle at the side of the bank. He reached down and picked it up. Tentatively, he reached down.

"Don't!" shouted Ron. Harry looked back at him and smiled.

"Peace," he whispered to the water, and began to fill the small vial. Watching the waves lap against the bank, he turned to look up at the top of the falls. "I think... I think the Centaurs heard I was ill from the guardian hex and brought me here to be healed... maybe more."

"Centaurs?"

"I think," Harry said with a shrug. "That's when I lost this." He tapped his forehead where the scar once was. "It's like everything that was dark about Voldemort, everything evil he marked me with, has vanished. I've been cleansed."

"Cleansed!" Ron shouted. "That's what I heard them say! In... in the water..." Ron's voice trailed off hearing how fantastic it all sounded.

"I heard them too," said Harry softly. "Did you answer them back? Did you agree?" Harry stood and carefully placed a stopper on the potions bottle, and then slipped it into his pack. The two looked at each other for a moment, and a peaceful smile filled Ron's face. His eyes were bright with a joy Harry had long missed.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Yeah, I suppose I did." He reached up with his right hand to the back of his neck to feel the small swirl that now remained.

"Harry," he asked, "do you think I can still... you know. Mind if I try?"

Harry shook his head, and stood to face Ron as they had done so many times earlier in the year. Ron watched as Harry closed his eyes, and then he closed his own. The air was silent save for the roar of the falls, when Harry began to hear a whisper. He could sense Ron, but not well enough to focus on finding a way to push him back. Perhaps Ron's powers had failed. The whispers stopped, and both opened their eyes. A small grin creased Ron's lips.

"It didn't hurt," he said as he held his fingertips to his temples. "Why didn't you push back?"

"I didn't... I couldn't." Harry's poise changed a bit realizing Ron had just had a free crawl around in Harry's brain. "Why? What did you see?"

"Nothin'," said Ron innocently. "Just school stuff."

"Ron?"

"We'd better get back; didn't you say Hermione would be looking for you?"

Harry looked up to see the sun cracking through branches in the trees. He did need to get back, and then he realized... "No, no I didn't say that."

"Really, Harry, that's all I saw, or heard. I promise I won't look again."

Harry could tell by the mirth in Ron's voice that there was more. But if he really knew what Harry was up to, would he be so jovial? Harry didn't want to argue about it. In fact, he wanted Ron to know everything. As he went over to pick up his broom, he decided to clear the air.

"I'm going to bring back, Sirius," he said flatly. "Try, at least."

"You're what?" Ron exclaimed. Clearly this was one thought in Harry's mind that hadn't been read. Still, Harry went forward and began to explain his plan. Ron listened intently as if hearing a great

new fiction for the first time, and then he whispered, "So that's what she's been doing."

"You didn't know?" asked Harry. "I thought you and... I thought the both of you were..." Ron shook his head and sighed.

"The girl's ten moves ahead of me every minute of the day," he said. "I can't keep up, and I've stopped trying. I don't even know why she wants to be with me. I'm such a git. She really should have been in Ravenclaw, then she could be with a guy who's... who's..."

"BORRRRING," said Harry with both hands cupped about his mouth. "You've found a way into her heart, Ron. I should have seen it years ago; I think you're soul mates."

Ron smiled at this looking out across the water. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He reached down and picked up a flat stone to skip it across the lake. He gave it a mighty toss; the stone skipped once then shot across the small pond of water and careened into a modest tree that cracked in two, and fell silently to the ground. Both he and Harry were surprised. "Strange magic, that," said Ron. Harry nodded in agreement.

"It's pure magic, powerful magic, the lifeblood of Hogwarts," said Harry. "With it Tonks and I are going to bring back Sirius."

Harry began to explain the riddle in more detail, and told Ron the full plan he had... Tonks had to set Sirius free. It was easy really; he didn't care anymore what Ron or Hermione thought. Tonks would mix Lucius Malfoy's blood with the magical, purifying water of Hogwarts and they would have a chance to bring back Sirius from behind the curtain. Of course, they might set every other criminal imaginable free too, but Harry would be ready for that. He half expected, half hoped the wizards stepping out would return in the reverse order they entered, much like Voldemort's wand showed the last incantations he cast. If it was the other way around, things might become difficult, but he'd worry about that then.

As for explaining the falls themselves and how he knew about them, that was more a mystery. Not even Harry truly understood what had

happened to him the night he lost the scar on his forehead. He understood even less how Ron had been cured of the scars on his back.

"At least I'm not a raving lunatic because of the guardian hex that Grigor placed upon me," said Harry.

"But your arm," asked Ron. "The scar is still there."

"I don't think Grigor did this," answered Harry as they drew close, "I think this appeared because of something Soseh did to protect me the day we first met... something good. And look..." Harry held his arm up and in the growing light of dawn Ron could see that wings had appeared to form the guard of the sword flaring outward between the hilt and the blade from behind the snake's mouth.

"I don't get it," said Ron. "What's happening?"

"Don't you see, Ron?" answered Harry. "The sword and the snake, a vine and wings. They represent the most loved possessions of the founders: Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. It's telling me something, Ron; it's telling me that we're close... that Hogwarts is becoming one. That's my true destiny."

"And Draco's scar?" Ron asked. "That's the same as ever."

"No it's not," Harry answered. "It's fading. You may not notice, Ron, but I've been watching. It's getting lighter. If he wants to, he can make it disappear. I've always said it was out of my hands, and in his."

"You know what he'll do with it if it's left to his hands, don't you?" said Ron with a bit of a sneer. "He loves no one but himself, Harry. It's there to stay."

"Come on," said Harry, not sure what would happen, "we'd better go. Gab will kill me if we're much longer."

The two mounted the broom and began to ascend over the trees, the morning sun bright in their faces. As they rose to a height level with the top of the falls, Harry thought he noticed two Centaurs at the

water's edge, one with red hair. He turned his broom for a closer look, but there was a snap, and he found himself with Ron in another part of the forest.

"What the..." began Ron.

"We just cross some sort of protection zone about the falls. You can't get to them during the day without it sending you somewhere you don't want to be. I guess it works both ways." Harry leaned the nose of the Caduceus upward and again they climbed. It was going to be a brilliant day to play Quidditch. With such weather the crowds would be huge, and that meant a better chance for Tonks to slip away. About half-way to the castle, Ron leaned forward to Harry.

"So you and Gabriella were together the other night?" Ron asked innocently.

"Yeah, you wouldn't believe..." Harry stopped himself. "How did you know that we..." his ears reddened.

"Yeah," said Ron, smiling as the castle rose over the treetops in the distance. "I am definitely going to have to try that with Hermione."

Harry gave Ron's gut a firm jab with his elbow, but Ron only laughed.

"I ought to drop you in the middle of the pitch without the cloak and without your wand," said Harry, not meaning a word and with half a snigger. As they drew near the castle, Harry pulled low toward the back of Hagrid's hut and lit to the ground.

"Well, it's breakfast now," said Harry as they watched a few students stepping out to enjoy the morning sun. "I guess Nott and Parkinson will be disappointed."

"Two minds that won't fool me again," said Ron with contempt.

Already down by the lake, Cho Chang and Anthony Goldstein were playing a game Dennis Creevey had invented called Zipper-Pitch. It came to him during the DA meetings and had now become a fairly popular game. Harry even noticed some older wizards playing it in

Hogsmeade. Two or more players stand out on the field and cast one or more spells at each other, only the spells don't travel at their normal speed through the air. Instead, they begin traveling slowly, not much faster than a Quaffle falling through the air, toward their intended victim who then deflects it toward his opponent. As time passes, the spell, which resembles a very bright glowing fairy, gathers speed. Eventually, the scene is akin to a Muggle tennis match in hyper-drive. Deflection after deflection, from one wizard to another, the spell gathering speed until finally... there was a loud Pop! down by the lake as Cho missed the deflection. She glowed bright red and suddenly sprouted feathers. Watching with Harry, Ron laughed as did the two Ravenclaws by the lake. Anthony cast the dispelling charm on Cho, and they began to play again.

"She caught that one under the arm," said Ron.

"Yeah," said Harry, a bit sullen. "She's gotten loads better since the accident, but I don't think she'll ever be perfect."

"Are any of us, mate?" asked Ron in bare feet as they hunched under the invisibility cloak and made their way up to the front steps.

Inside the castle, they decided to descend to the Slytherin common room. With most students either asleep or at breakfast, the staircases and corridors were essentially empty. Outside the entrance to Slytherin they pulled off the cloak and Harry slipped it into his pack. Hesitating, Ron was a bit uncomfortable entering without his wand when two familiar voices filled the air. Immediately, Harry slipped out of sight around the corner and hid behind a suit of armor.

"Thank you so much for helping me with that, Hermione," said Gabriella's voice brightly as they walked down the corridor. "I know it was such an imposition, but with the Quidditch match today I didn't think I'd have a chance to get your help. Everyone knows you're the best in Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration class, and with a quiz Monday... well I just wanted to be sure.

"No problem, Gabriella," said Hermione warmly. "Your transformation was wonderful. Just remember to flick your wrist a bit more as you cast the spell; it helps focus the energy."

"Yes, of course," answered Gabriella, the steps of the witches coming closer. "It's a shame we must sit apart at breakfast; I do have so many other questions."

"I heard Dumbledore's considering some sort of change, at lunch at least. Well, I really should be getting back to Gryffindor," said Hermione with a slight change in tone. "There's some, er... things I need to check on. Maybe after we can... Ron?"

"Ron?" asked Gabriella as well.

"Er... hi!" said Ron with a nervous brightness in his voice.

"What in the world..." started Hermione, but Ron cut her off and answered her questions before she could ask. He told her about being striped like a tiger and stuck to the wall, but that the sticking charms didn't hold and he was able to escape.

"And you're just now getting back?" asked Gabriella.

"Well... I've been ducking in and out of alcoves trying not to be seen. That... that takes time."

"Well, I'd tell Snape if I were you," said Hermione angrily, "and I'm definitely telling Professor McGonagall. That's just inexcusable! You're a prefect!"

"Yeah, I er... need to get changed. Can we meet after breakfast?"

Harry, still hidden from view, assumed Hermione nodded in agreement, because there was a kiss and steps trailed away. After a moment's pause Gabriella broke the silence.

"And where did the stripes go?" she asked.

"Erm... I vanished them," answered Ron.

"Without a wand?" asked Gabriella. "You sound like... Harry! Harry where are you?"

Harry stepped out from behind the corner, and he watched as a great smile spread across Gabriella's face. They hugged and kissed.

"Did you get it?" she asked. Harry nodded. "And Ron was with you?" Again he nodded. "And the story of the stripes?"

"That was true!" Ron blurted out. "Nott and Parkinson... backstabbin'..." his voice trailed not wanting to cuss in front of Gabriella whose lips tightened.

"She's evil is what she is," said Gabriella. "I can see it in her heart. We'll have to think of something... special for her and her boyfriend; don't you think, Ron?" There was a look in Gabriella's eyes that disquieted Harry, and to his surprise even Ron was a bit taken back. "Come," she said sharply to Ron, "let's get you changed." She gave Harry another kiss, and started toward the Slytherin entrance whispering its password.

"See ya, mate," said Ron as the two walked in and the door closed behind them.

There was an uneasy feeling in Harry's stomach as he headed back to the Gryffindor common room. He was headed up the first stone staircase when he met Tonks coming down.

"Wotcher, Harry!" she said smiling. "Are you ready to watch the big match today? It should be... what's with the broom?" Harry looked at the Caduceus in his hand and back at Tonks.

"I got it," was all he said, as he tapped the pack on his shoulder. It was all he needed to say. The smile vanished from Tonks' face as she looked at the pack with grave concern. She knew he told the truth. Immediately, her eyes flashed up and down the staircase, and an expression of eager anticipation began to build.

"The best chance we have," she whispered, "will be the night of the full moon."

“Full moon!” exclaimed Harry. “That’s nearly three weeks!” Tonks’ eyes remained steady and stern. Harry knew that many types of magic were strongest beneath the rays of the full moon. If they wanted to maximize their chances, it only made sense to wait.

“That’s just before our match against, Slytherin,” he said. “Katie will want us out on the pitch practicing that night, and I want to be with you.”

“No,” Tonks shook her head, “it’s best if you don’t...”

“I’m going to be there,” Harry interrupted. If it was a ruse to release Voldemort’s new army, he wanted to be there to stop it. If it wasn’t, he wanted to be there to hold Sirius in his arms.

There was a look of pain on Tonks’ face; the expression distorted in waves as if she were unable to center her emotions. Clearly, she didn’t want Harry to go, but why? Was Hermione right? Was she under Voldemort’s control and now standing in front of him fighting the Imperius Curse as Barty Crouch had done before? Her eyes darted back and forth looking for an answer and when they stopped, Harry knew she’d made up her mind.

As her eyes had been searching, Harry had held up his broom and the sleeve of his robe had fallen down to reveal the mark beneath. It was there Tonks fixed her eyes, and it was there where her decision was made.

“Of course, Harry,” she whispered. “You’re right. You should be there; you need to be there... body and soul.”

Chapter 67 - Dreaming with the Snake

The full moon loomed bright on the horizon as the sun dipped and set to the west. The sky was a brilliant red with flickers of gold where the sun skipped off the edges of the few floating clouds. It wasn't the Mediterranean, but the lake's reflection of the scene made Harry wonder if such a beautiful sight could be rivaled. But then, he was biased; tonight was the night. He fiddled with the small potions bottle in his pocket. It contained the secret ingredient that would set Sirius free -- ten gallons of pure water welled from a source of endless magic. Of course, he would need only a small fraction of that, but he wasn't taking chances. Mixed with Lucius Malfoy's pure blood in a basin cast of gold, the ingredients would open the Curtain of Phenolem. He'd given Tonks back the key that would allow the basin's lock to spin, and together the two had deciphered the proper runes. She would meet him tonight after hours at the Ministry of Magic; the portkey was under his pillow in the boys' dormitory.

"What are you looking at?" asked Hermione lightly as she sat at the table in the common room reviewing her Arithmancy notes. Harry turned back from the window to speak to her.

"Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?" he asked, and then turned back to look out the window. Hermione pushed back her chair, stood up and walked over next to Harry.

"Oh my," she said breathlessly, "what an evening."

The ripples of the lake continued to shimmer, flashing a myriad of colours just as the first stars began to appear in the night sky.

"Look!" Harry called. The great squid of the lake had breached the water's surface sending a huge plume of water into the air, and pushing an enormous wave of water to each bank. Harry and Hermione watched as the rings spread out in all directions and the squid disappeared from view. "Summer will be here soon," Harry whispered.

"N.E.W.T. exams will be here sooner," said Hermione in anxious anticipation, almost like a small child moving up in queue for circus

tickets. Still soaking in the sight, she put her arm about Harry's waist. "I'm supposed to help Ron tonight with his History homework. Maybe you and Gabriella could join us?"

The change in direction of the conversation was too quick for Harry, and he found himself grinding gears as his tongue tied against his teeth. As much as he'd told himself he didn't care if Hermione knew his plans, he couldn't bare to tell her.

"Erm... join you?" he sputtered. "Er, no... we can't, or I can't... tonight that is. I-I'm well, really behind in Potions and all."

"I thought you finished Snape's assignment last night?" questioned Hermione with surprise.

"Oh, that... no, I... well that I just told you so you wouldn't get on my case about... you know... homework and all." Hearing this Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"Is that what you think I do?" she suddenly snapped, her voice growing in intensity. "Get on your case?"

"No... I just meant that..."

"Hey, Harry, Hermione" called Neville. "Are you going to dinner?" Both he, Seamus and Walreux were standing at the bottom of the staircase.

"Sure Neville!" called Harry. Then quietly he whispered, "Come on Hermione, let's eat. I just don't think clearly on an empty stomach. I'm sorry."

"You sound like Ron," she said with a puckered smile and thin eyes. Finally, she uncrossed her arms and let out a sigh. "Very well."

"Brilliant," said Harry brightly, putting his arm around her shoulders, and the group made their way out the portrait and down to dinner listening to Hermione go on about how important N.E.W.T. exams were.

In the Great Hall, much of the talk was centered on Ravenclaw's loss to Hufflepuff last week and the upcoming match, next week, of Slytherin and Gryffindor. Cho had caught the Snitch in last week's match, but only after Ravenclaw was down by over two-hundred points with no chance of climbing back. That put Gryffindor as the only house with two wins. If Gryffindor were to beat Slytherin next week they would be undefeated and the house champions; if they were to lose, Slytherin would also have two wins and because of their defeat of Gryffindor in head-to-head competition Slytherin would be the house champions. There was tremendous speculation over Malfoy, many wondering if he had been clean from potions long enough to be effective against Harry, but that was overshadowed by the possibility that Ron Weasley would play Keeper for Slytherin.

Harry sat across from Neville and Peter Walreux as a plate of beef strips, steamed vegetables and applesauce appeared before him. He cast a glance to the teacher's table and saw, as expected, that Tonks was absent from her position next to Hagrid -- a fact that did not go unnoticed by Hermione.

"I wonder where Tonks is this evening?" she asked casually, but with a hint of concern.

"Probably, out being an Auror again," said Neville, taking a drink of milk.

"Yeah, there's Death Eaters to be had," added Seamus who was seated next to Hermione.

"No," said Hermione thoughtfully, "she's always here on the full moon." For the briefest instant, her eyes flashed to Harry who was focused on the strips of beef before him. Still, he caught her look out of the corner of his eye and held his gaze onto his plate until she looked away. Hermione took one bite of dinner and began to tap her spoon nervously against the top of the dinner table. Neville began to talk to Peter about the multiple ways to harvest Poisonous Plums from a Killing Caedo tree. Hermione's tapping grew louder.

"I'm really not that hungry," she said pushing in her plate. "I think I'll go back and study a bit."

“Later, Hermione,” said Seamus, and Hermione stepped between the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables toward the doors of the Great Hall. Seamus turned to Neville and said, “Over a week till N.E.W.T. exams, an’ she’s worried if she’s done studied enough! She’s more prepared than the three of us combined,” he said, kind enough to include Harry in the equation, and kind enough to leave out Walreux.

For his part, Harry watched Ron stand from the Slytherin table and meet her at the entrance. The two spoke, then glanced back at Harry. Ron showed a distinct level of discomfort when he saw Harry looking back at him, and quickly turned his head.

There was a burst of laughter, and Harry spun to see Patrick O’Riley smiling at something Dennis Creevey had said; milk was running out Patrick’s nose. Harry couldn’t help but smile himself. “Excellent”, he thought, but when he glanced back to the front doors, Ron and Hermione were gone. He was a bit nervous, and reached into his pocket yet again and twiddled the bauble inside.

It was far too early to be worrying about anything, and yet the palms of Harry’s hands were wet with perspiration, slipping about the small glass vial holding such a large amount of liquid treasure. Searching for something to do, his eyes looked for Gabriella at the Slytherin table; instead, they found Draco looking straight back at him. While everyone else seemed animated and excited, filled with the energy of the new moon, Draco sat like a great rock fixed in a turbulent sea. Stoically, he held Harry’s gaze with his own, then almost imperceptible narrowed his eyes and nodded his head to the front doors. A moment later, he stood and was walking alone out of the Great Hall. Harry watched him leave, and then excused himself.

“I’m not too hungry either,” he said to his friends. “Maybe later.”

Walking out into the corridor Harry caught a glimpse of Malfoy’s pale-blond hair walking toward the staircases to the dungeons. He followed him below ground and joined him in an empty classroom adjacent to Potions. Malfoy held his wand up and sealed the room.

“You’re going to have to teach me that sometime,” Harry said brightly.

"Yeah, right," answered Malfoy dully. "Hell, I think the damn house elf stopped following me weeks ago. Still, better safe than sorry as father always says." He grunted and then pulled out a bench seat from behind a desk, sighed heavily, flopped down, and stared blankly out in space.

"Well?" Harry asked. Malfoy looked tired, or bored, or angry, or a mixture of all three. Slowly he lifted his eyes to meet Harry's.

"That's my line, Harry," said Malfoy, still dryly but with a pinch of irritation. Harry looked about, hoping to find a window to divert his gaze, but there were none in the dungeons. "Yeah," said Malfoy, hunching with his elbows on his knees, "that's what I thought you'd say... nothing."

"I don't know what..."

"THAT'S DOXY DUNG!" Malfoy exploded, taking to his feet and facing Harry head on. "It doesn't work that way, Potter! Tell me why in the name of Morgana you're going to be at the Ministry tonight at midnight!"

You could have blown Harry over with a fairy. If he'd had trouble trying to cover his tracks with Hermione earlier, this would be impossible. His opportunity to respond coolly vanished, and with it any hope of fabricating a lie.

"How did you..."

"We were supposed to be a team!" Malfoy yelled again, and this time sorrow and disappointment mixed in with his words. The blonde dropped back down on the wooden bench seat. His head fell into his hands as he clenched the locks of hair falling at the sides of his face with his fingers. "You've been using me since we started." Malfoy sighed. "He was right." Harry wasn't sure who he was, but he knew now was not the right time to ask.

"That's not true," Harry said softly. There was a deep pain that surrounded Malfoy, although Harry didn't know what it was centered

on; there were so many possibilities. He walked closer to the Slytherin.

"Isn't it?" Malfoy spat. "Going to the Ministry with a member of the Order, and it's not something you want to share? What's the matter, Harry? Don't you trust me?" The words were sharp, bitter. "I've spent my bank account in demonstrations; there's nothing left."

"I... I trust you," said Harry. His words were honest, solid and sincere, and their tone pulled Malfoy's gaze off the floor. "I'm not going because she's with the Order, Draco. It... it's personal."

"Personal?" cried out Malfoy, the rage ebbing back to the surface. "Well it's not personal to my father! It's not personal to the Death Eaters! It's not personal to the Dark Lord!" Malfoy stood back to his feet and stormed over to a large globe of Jupiter floating above the professor's desk, and spun it madly. He turned and looked back at his friend. "How is it that every dark magician between here and Tibet knows where you'll be tonight? Every one, that is, apart from me!" He slammed the globe with his fist and it raced across the floor shattering against the wall.

Now Harry's forehead began to prickle with perspiration. It had been a trap all along, but then part of him always knew it was a trap. Why hadn't he asked Malfoy to begin with? Without thinking, he reached into his pocket and began to spin the vial in his fingers. The other part of him still wanted to believe that Tonks was being truthful, but its voice was small and was now but a whisper. The classroom's walls began to slide their way toward him. Malfoy noted the apprehension filling Harry's face.

"I can't just let him die," Harry whispered to the air. "It... it was all - my - fault!" He was growing warmer by the second, the air was growing heavy, and Harry's legs seemed to lose the will to bare their burden. His vision began to tunnel down to pricks of light, and Harry stumbled trying to make it to the door. His weight fell onto a desk that flipped over, and Harry fell hard to the floor, the desk landing on top of him. He felt just like he did when he returned to number five, Grimmauld Place last summer. "Sirius," he whispered. He couldn't catch his breath and everything began to spin as all faded to blackness.

A voice echoed from the abyss. "He's not gone you know, just on the other side." It was Luna Lovegood, but he couldn't see her. "The voices... didn't you hear them? If only we could find a way to bring him home. But you know the way, don't you, Harry? You have the key! Do you see my mother?" But Harry couldn't see anything. "What would you give, Harry? What would you give to bring him back?" Everything began to spin, and Harry felt like retching. Luna's voice began to fade, "If you see my mother, tell her I miss her so." An overwhelming burst of nausea filled Harry, and it spewed forth all over the classroom floor.

"Damn, Potter," hissed Malfoy, "these were new boots!" Malfoy pulled his wand and cleaned the floor with a flick of his wrist, then helped Harry to a sitting position on the spotless stones. He sat down next to his adversary, his partner, and let out a long slow breath. They sat like that, side-by-side for some minutes. Harry continued to tremble, awash in unbridled emotions. Finally, Malfoy asked, "Black? Is that what this is about? Sirius Black? Your... your godfather?"

Hearing the name, Harry began to pull in huge gulps of air. All year he'd waited for this moment, his chance to redeem his stupidity, and now... "He died because of me!" Harry's voice cracked, grabbing Malfoy by the front of his robes. "I killed him, Draco. I lured him there and set him before the curtain. Your aunt just gave the final push, that's all." Harry's body gave a tremendous shudder. "It was me!" Tears welled up in Harry's eyes, and the film that had long been absent began to play in Harry's mind. "It's ruined! It's all ruined!" Harry broke down into heaving sobs. Still clutching Malfoy's robes he dropped his head into the Slytherins lap and cried.

Malfoy's back stiffened as he looked about the room; surely his charm on the walls had worn away by now. If the house elf was about, their cover would be blown. Harry continued to cry and, not reluctantly but hesitantly, Malfoy put his arm on Harry's shoulder. Whatever bitterness he'd been feeling evaporated; Harry had his reasons... family, a reason Draco understood all too well.

After a few moments, Harry sat up and bashed his hand against the stone floor. "Damn!" he yelled as he tilted his head back and wiped

his eyes. Still, staring upwards his head against the wall Harry whispered, "I don't care; I'm going to do it anyway."

"It's suicide," Malfoy whispered.

"I can't live knowing I had the chance to bring him back and then did nothing. I've got to try."

There was a long silence before Malfoy spoke to the floor... words that would take Harry a long time to understand.

"I guess for you, it was your parents... and now Sirius. I don't know, maybe..." His hands were folded in on each other, clasped in something resembling a prayer.

"Maybe what?" asked Harry, looking at Malfoy who still had his eyes fixed at the patterns in the stone floor.

"Did you... have you ever wanted something so very much that every waking moment, every dream, and all times in between were held by that one desire?" Before Harry could speak, Malfoy went on. "And yet, know that no matter what effort you put toward realizing that desire, that passion, your wish would never ever come true?"

"You're right," agreed Harry with a hushed whisper, "my parents." Malfoy nodded knowingly with him.

"I came to Hogwarts ready to be who I thought I was... Draco Malfoy, son of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, the purest of pure-blood wizards. Heir of wealth and power; the world was mine and all would serve my will. I thought I knew, Harry... but I was wrong. Over Thanksgiving, I stumbled across the Mirror of Erised. I think it was a cruel plan of that gray bearded fool of a Headmaster you prattle on about so much." Malfoy let out a short snicker. His eyes left the floor and looked straight ahead at the opposite wall, but their focus was well beyond the walls of the castle.

"I saw... I saw the thing I knew I always wanted. I saw a future that I knew I could never have. I didn't want to leave. I sat there for hours, but then Dumbledore came, said something quite Dumbledore-like,

and sent me on my way.” Malfoy sighed. “I never did find the mirror again.” The Slytherin stood, dusted his robes, and pulled Harry to his feet.

“I think Dumbledore was wrong. I think it would have been better to die in front of the glass, than have this life.” Harry started to speak, but Malfoy held two fingers over Harry’s lips.

“Shhh. I may not be able to have my dream, Harry, but maybe I can do something about yours.” The Slytherin pulled his robe up tight about his shoulders and started toward the door. “I’m off to the Burrow.” Harry’s jaw dropped. “Yeah, he’s been having a right laugh about that one. We’ve been back about a week.” Draco shook his head. “I can buy you maybe an hour around midnight, Harry. After that...” he turned and looked back, “we’re both dead.”

Before Draco turned to leave, Harry noticed the scar on the Slytherin’s face fade.

“Draco,” Harry whispered, following him to the door. He put his hand against Draco’s face. “It... it’s gone.” Draco lifted his hand next to Harry’s. There was no raised edge of the sword or snake, no tightening as he smiled.

“Is it?” Draco asked nonplussed. “Huh,” he exhaled in a short burst. He shrugged his shoulders and dropped his hand. Toe-to-toe, his gray eyes narrowed looking through Harry’s green. “I was so hoping to kick your arse next week. Not to worry though, the Quidditch cup will still go to Slytherin; we’ve got Weasles.” He patted Harry lightly on the side of the face. “And Harry, tonight... don’t dawdle; get him and get out. I... I never want to see you again.”

Before Harry could say a word, Draco slipped out the door and walked briskly toward the Slytherin common room. Holding a hand to the side of his own face, Harry watched as he disappeared around the corner. The floor felt like it was swaying back and forth, as if he were in the hull of a great ship beset by a storm at sea. A lone drip of perspiration wicked its way down from Harry’s brow. There would be no turning back now, Draco’s life hung in the balance. Time? What time was it?

Quickly, Harry charged down the corridor and began the ascent to Gryffindor tower. He'd just made it past the library when her voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Harry? Harry, what's going on?" Gabriella rolled a parchment she was examining, and quickly stepped over to meet him. Her words were steeped in concern. She'd seen his mood swinging all day, and she knew something was amiss. The drip of perspiration on Harry's brow was now a torrent of sweat. The back of his shirt was soaked and his face flush.

"Er... nothing, why?" he tried to say innocently.

"Come over and sit down," she said temptingly, "tell me what's wrong." Harry's eyes darted about like a chipmunk scanning for safety. Near the entrance of the library stood a group of students, all from different houses, studying Transfiguration. James Chang was there, wearing green robes. This was the last place to be talking about leaving Hogwarts in the middle of the night and he didn't have time to find somewhere more secluded.

"Er... no," Harry said nervously, "I-I'm just going to go back to the common room and get to bed. Goodnight's rest and all." He offered a weak smile.

"Very well," she whispered dejectedly. "You do look warm." She reached over and held his face in her hands and gave him a kiss on the forehead. A cool breeze seeped through Harry's brain and down his back; what a touch. There were a few howls from the table of first years. When she let go and opened her eyes, the twinkle Harry expected to see was absent. Instead, her eyes were distant and concerned.

"You know I love you, don't you?" she said. It was not an unwelcome comment, but felt jarringly out of place considering the conversation. Harry looked at her and smiled. He began to unbutton his shirt which elicited another catcall from the table.

"I want you to hold something for me... just for awhile." He pulled off the necklace that Professor McGonagall had given him and placed it around her neck. "It... it's very special."

"Harry?" Gabriella asked, her eyes filling with fear. He slipped the chain over her head.

"There... Beautiful," he said with a smile, pressing his hand warmly against the charm that now hung about her neck. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "I'm really tired. I'll see you in the morning, I swear." He started up the staircases once again, Gabriella watching his every step. As the last one finally spun into place, he stepped off and looked back down at her. "I love you too!" he called, and disappeared down the corridor to the Fat Lady.

Speaking the password, he mentally braced himself for the questions he knew Hermione would pelt him with once he walked through the door. He would stick with "tired... sick... goodnight..." and that would be that. As the door opened, he entered to see a very quiet common room. A few students were already preparing banners for next week's game against Slytherin. Not surprisingly, Harry found the familiar sight of Ginny next to Dean on the couch in front of the fireplace. He scanned the room, but there was no Hermione.

"Hey, Harry," said Ginny in welcome as he walked through the portrait. She turned back to Dean as they continued to do their homework.

"Have you seen Hermione?" Harry asked.

"She and Ron were talking downstairs," Ginny replied. "I guess that was about an hour ago."

"Then Ron stopped by to see you," added Dean. "He went upstairs to look for you, but you were gone."

"You let him in?" Harry asked sharply. "He's in Slytherin!"

"He's my brother!" snapped Ginny. "And he'll always be a Gryffindor."

Harry ran up the spiral staircase to the boys' dormitory. A quick scan told him immediately what was missing... his broom. The Caduceus which always hung to the side of Harry's bed was gone. Quickly, he ran back down.

"Did you see him take it?" he asked loudly. "Did you let your brother walk out of here with my Caduceus?"

"What are you talking about?" said Ginny, her own voice pitching higher. Harry could see at once she didn't know.

"My broom! Your brother's taken my broom!" Harry's voice was agitated and his pitch high. In Ginny's eyes, it was more excitement than the situation warranted.

"He probably just took it for a spin, Harry. I doubt that... oh no!"

"What?" Harry exclaimed.

"The match!" she cried. "He's taken it so you won't have it for the match! Slytherin's brainwashed him! That little rat! I'll kill him!" She stood facing Harry. "I'm so sorry, I wasn't thinking, Harry."

Harry wanted to scream that he didn't take the bloody broom as a prank; he took it to fly to the Ministry. He kicked a table and it went flying across the room. Ginny was mortified.

"Look, we can get Cho to..."

"Forget the damn broom!" Harry spat, and he stormed out of the common room into the corridor. He was breathing heavily, trying to bring focus back on their plan, trying to clear his mind of unnecessary thoughts, but here was not the place to forget. Stains of Dementor blood still splotched the floor. Stick to the plan! Gathering himself, he walked back into the common room and announced he was going to bed early. If he acted quickly, he might still get there first.

"Goodnight!" he said loudly for everyone to hear. There were a few returns of the same, Ginny tried to apologize once more, and finally

he slipped into the dormitory. He let out a sigh of relief when he found it empty.

He walked over to his bed and carefully pulled out the little white box from under his pillow. Inside was a small silver sphere - a portkey to the Ministry. Tonks' words began to play in his head.

"Harry, this will take you to the corridor just outside the great hall where the Fountain of Magical Brethren is at the Ministry. Meet me there thirty minutes before midnight. I'll take care of the guards and we'll apparate down to the chamber holding hands. I'll have everything ready by then; the basin and the blood will be waiting there. Until the end, we'll keep everything separate. You bring the water, and Harry... don't tell a soul." Tonks seemed extremely anxious. It was clear she wanted to say more, but couldn't, or wouldn't. Finally she put on her best smile. "We can do this, Harry. I know we can!"

Harry wondered what it was she wanted to add; what little bit was she leaving out? And once we're downstairs I'm handing you over to Voldemort. He took a deep breath levitating his covers to look as if they had a body beneath. He pulled the curtains about his bed which was always a sign not to disturb, and pulled out the white box from off his desk. It was a bit early, but he wanted to make it to the Ministry before Ron and Hermione.

He wished he could have had the added power of the vivificus stone. He swallowed hard double checking that the water was in his pocket and his wand was in his sleeve. Perhaps tonight the prophecy would be fulfilled. Slowly, with a shaking hand he reached out and took the silver orb in his fingers. There was a firm yank at his navel, the wind swirled in his face, and a moment later he was on his knees upon a highly polished dark wood floor. Taking in a breath, he froze. The air was filled with the smell of burning flesh. Looking up, he saw a guard propped in the corner, his eyes closed.

All was silent when he heard an incantation given with a high, cold voice. Harry's skin prickled as the corridor filled with the crackling sound of lighting from the large and splendid hall that waited just around the corner. There was a loud crack, and then a scream.

In a flash, Harry was on his feet, his wand at the ready. His heart began to pound but his hand was steady. If ever he needed his wits about him, it was now. He knew that high, cold voice -- Voldemort's; and he knew who uttered the scream -- Hermione Granger.

Chapter 68 - A Black Slate

In the corridor just off the grand entrance hall of the Ministry of Magic, Harry blinked trying to adjust his eyes to the dim light. Sliding over the polished wood floor on his hands and knees to get a better look around the wall, he brushed up against the guard unconscious in the corner. If anything, the wizard appeared to be sleeping, enjoying some sort of dream by the small smile that was on his face. For a moment, all Harry could hear was the burbling babble of the Fountain of Magical Brethren. Then it happened again: Voldemort's voice issued a command, there was an electric snap, a crack, and Hermione let out a short, sharp scream.

Harry moved to get a better look at what he hoped he would not see, but knew he would. Slowly rising up from all fours, he clung to the side of the wall and peered around its edge into the resplendent hall. While the fireplaces were dormant, large lit lamps flickered along the walls casting a weak glow over the entire room. His eyes could make out the newly repaired fountain -- the centaur, house elf, wizard, witch and goblin all smiling at each other. Behind the fountain's large base, he could see the feet of a wizard wearing Slytherin robes that had fallen in a heap on the floor. "Ron!" his mind screamed. Further to the left his gaze landed on a trembling witch in dark purple robes, her wand at the ready. She was looking up at something, her wand arm trembling slightly. Harry continued to move his head around the corner expecting to see a vast hoard of Death Eaters, but instead found one hooded figure, Lord Voldemort himself.

The Dark Lord was floating some three to four feet off the ground, his wand pointed directly at Hermione. His red eyes burned bright in the darkness and his face bore a broad smile of smug satisfaction.

"As I was saying... I am expecting your friend, Harry," he hissed. "Perhaps, before I put you down like your friend there, you can tell me where he is, and when he will arrive." Voldemort cast a beam of red light striking just to the left of Hermione whose shield charm was unnecessary. Still, she let out a short shriek as she jumped to the left. "Cat got your tongue?" he asked.

“Harry’s too smart not to know this was a trap!” Hermione yelled back, her voice echoing off the stone walls. “He wouldn’t step within miles of here!”

“Trap?” Voldemort began to laugh in a thin, jerking rasp.

“I won’t let you have him!” Hermione cried. “He’s my friend!” She held her wand a bit higher, and the trembling vanished.

“Friend?” Voldemort sneered. “You didn’t serve your other friend very well, I’m afraid.” He began to cackle pointing at the pile of robes by the fountain. “How do you suppose you can now help, Potter?” His voice was cold and meant to antagonize.

“Leave now,” yelled Hermione, “or I’ll fry you completely!” The Dark Lord’s face froze in a look of pure hatred. Harry’s eyes, adjusting to the light, could now see that the bottom of Voldemort’s black robes had been badly burned. There was a reason he wasn’t standing on his feet.

“I have no more time for games, Ms. Granger,” he said with a slither. “And I would certainly prefer your absence when he arrives. It’s time for you to join your friend.” He again pointed at the crumpled wizard by the fountain. “Good-bye.”

What happened next was a tale told at Hogwarts and debated in the legal circles of the Ministry for years to come. It was a confluence of events that happened almost simultaneously, and many debate to this day if the sequencing had been only slightly different....

Harry rounded the corner to reveal himself fully. The move went unnoticed by Voldemort, but not Hermione who turned her attention away from her adversary.

“Harry!” she cried, almost wishing her eyes were lying to her. Only they weren’t. He was charging head on toward the two duelists just as Voldemort raised his wand.

“NO!” Harry screamed, not hearing Voldemort’s spell, but seeing the green light emanate from the Dark Lord’s wand and streak toward

Hermione. “Locomotor Saxum!” Harry called remembering his first Defense Against the Dark Arts class with Tonks. In an instant, a stone bench that was at Hermione’s side flew upward toward the green beam now headed her way, but it was too late. Harry watched in horror as the shaft of green slipped past the bench and struck Hermione squarely in the chest. Her eyes closed and she fell limply to the ground. The stone bench crashed to the floor, shattering and spraying pebbles across the polished wooden floor.

“YOU BASTARD!” Harry roared, still charging forward as both his friends lay dead on the floor. “Never again! Never again!” Harry raised his wand.

Most wizards live their lives never thinking about the deaths that happen around them every day. Even in these dark times, times of war, the sacrifices of those who risk their lives are often ignored in preference of thoughts concerning the menu for the evening’s supper. And yet, wizards and Muggles alike were being killed because of the man floating before him. He would have liked to have said that he raised his wand in a noble effort to protect the precepts of the wizarding way of life. But what he felt now was not noble; it was not self-sacrifice. Harry’s soul had filled with pure hate. It was time to cross over, to kill. Love harbors no enemies. “Avada...” The sword defends, it does not attack. “...Ke...” Embrace the world, and...

“Harry wait,” a woman’s voice filled his ears and splashed cool water upon the fire in his soul, but the fuse was too far gone.

“...davra!”

A green light burst forth from his wand and struck the floating Voldemort. It wrapped around his robes and imploded inward. Without so much as a gasp, the Dark Lord fell to the floor with a dull thump, his singed robes furling quietly over the top of him. He looked more like a filthy pile of dirty laundry than anything else.

Once again, except for the burble of the fountain, all was quiet. Harry’s hand was clenched tightly about his wand, his knuckles white; he was finding it hard to breath and he thought he was going to be sick. Not wanting, but needing to, Harry walked over to Hermione, her

body extended on the floor. He could feel the sorrow and guilt welling up from inside and had to blink to see properly. She was on her back, her eyes closed. The anger and resentment welled back into him again. "I should have been here! I shouldn't have waited!" He wiped his face with the sleeve of his robe.

"I'm s-sorry," he whispered, falling to his knees at her side and dropping his wand. "Oh, God, I'm sorry." He began to cry as he reached down and took her hand. It was warm, a sensation he had not expected. He looked up to her face and realized that, like the guard at the entrance, her eyes were closed.

"Hermione?" he whispered as a faint flicker of hope whipped at his soul. He reached up to her face, holding it between his hands. "Hermione!" He saw colour; he felt warmth. She's not dead. Beads of perspirations prickled out all over his body. He reached madly for his wand, and finding it at her side he held it at her chest.

"Enervate!" he cried.

Instantly, Hermione's brown eyes burst wide open. Instinctively, she reached for her wand, and struggled at first when Harry grabbed her arms.

"It's okay," he said. "It's okay."

"Harry?" she asked in disbelief. Her body remained tense, and her eyes fearful.

"It's okay, Hermione," Harry answered her fear. "I've killed him. I used the Killing Curse. Voldemort is dead." He tried to say it with a smile, but his face wouldn't muster the right muscles. Instead, he turned her to see the twisted wizard covered in black robes on the floor.

"Dead?" she asked. Her eyes were flashing from Harry to Voldemort and back again, as if trying to convince herself that Harry was really here. Finally, the tension of her body withered and she grabbed Harry by the robes.

“Oh, Harry!” she said softly, and hugged him close. Her eyes, filled with tears, looked up into his. “He’s not dead; that’s...”

“Ron!” Harry exclaimed. “What about Ron? Is he okay?” He left Hermione’s side and rushed over to the pile of robes by the fountain. Hurriedly, he pulled back the green robes, and looking at the site beneath them dropped the cloth and stepped back, and back again. He rubbed his eyes with the sleeve of his robe. Again, Harry tried to gather his bearings.

Like Hermione’s, his body was on its back, his legs splayed outward and his hands flat against the polished floor. Harry guessed he was alive since, like Hermione’s, his eyes were also closed, draped to either side by a slick mass of greasy black hair.

“Snape?” Harry asked out loud, taking another step back.

“He followed me,” said Hermione. “Somehow he knew where I was going. He got one good shot at her legs before she took him down.”

“What?”

“She used the Voldemort disguise to take down the guard. I guess she thought it’d frighten me, but...”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked becoming agitated. Hermione stepped over to him and wrapped his arm in hers. Then she walked over to the crumple of dirty laundry that was Voldemort. She was beginning to shake, and Harry didn’t understand why.

“It wasn’t Voldemort, Harry; it was Tonks. She’s a Metamorphmagus and I think...”

“WHAT!” cried Harry, ripping his arm from Hermione and rummaging through the pile of black robes. His heart was pounding, his mind trying to recall any moment, any reason to make him believe that....

He pulled back a black flap of cloth and found her face. His heart sank. Her lids were open, and her eyes had rolled backward in their sockets so that only the whites revealed themselves. Harry choked,

unable to grasp a breath. This was no prophecy; it was... it was murder. He grabbed Tonks about the shoulders, his emotions shuddering all over the place.

"Nooo!" he howled in a low mournful cry. "No, no, no, no." He rocked her back and fourth in his arms when his cheek met hers and a small exhale of air popped from her lips. Harry stopped. "Did you hear that?"

"It's just air, Harry," said Hermione calmly. "She... she's gone."

Harry held his hand to her face; she was cold, but the eyes... the eyes were wrong. He'd seen the blank, expressionless stare of Cedric Digory and this was not it. Her voice. He'd heard her voice and hesitated. Hermione... Gabriella... had they both been right? Did he not have it in him to kill? If Tonks was still part of this world, where on the thread of life was she now? Harry had to find out.

"She's not dead!" he gasped. "She can't be."

"Harry, she's..."

"She's not dead! I won't let her be dead!"

Harry repositioned himself and knelt over Tonks' cold body. He could do this without the stone. Gabriella had said it was just a way to magnify the gifts he already had. Without further hesitation, he reached down and placed his hands over her eyes, closing his own. Focusing with all his might, he saw the darkness open up before him revealing the pathway to her life energy. In the distance was a brilliant red light. It burned bright but then dimmed, only to burn bright again and then dim. It was like a great engine trying to start, but unable to keep its fires burning.

Harry willed himself closer and as the red glow began to fill his vision he saw the curse he had just cast. A weak green tentacle had sprouted from the nothingness below the red glow and was growing upward, reaching for the light. Every time the two colours touched, the red glow would dim, but the green tentacle would pull away as if

stung. Harry watched as the scene repeated itself. He wondered how long this battle might last, perhaps forever if he didn't do something.

He reached out and grabbed the green tentacle with his hands and squeezed expecting it to burst like a filibuster firework. Instead, the squid-like beam of light twisted and writhed in his hands, tangling itself around his arms. It was more difficult than he was prepared for, and Harry had to redouble his efforts. Suddenly, he saw the slithering light sprout another appendage that wrapped itself around Harry's neck. He was starting to lose this battle; if only he had the stone. In a great thrash he pulled his foe high above his head and that was when he saw it -- his right arm glowing against the darkness. His scar was outlined in a brilliant orange, and the green tentacle seemed repelled by its light.

Harry pulled his arm close to his neck and the thing squeezing there let go. He could at least now breathe, if that's what he was doing, but his green foe would not relent, and as the battle raged on, he could feel himself tire. Thought of failure began to creep into his mind, and he began to wonder what would happen to him if he died there in the darkness of Tonks' essence. Suddenly, a voice, his own voice, echoed in his mind. "The sword defends, it does not attack. Defend yourself, Harry."

His right arm flashed a solid orange now, and there almost suspended on the surface of his skin was a blade of light. Harry let go of the green tentacle in his left hand and grabbed the sword. Its wings gave a great shudder and pulled him away from the green glow before him. The squid-like tentacle turned from Harry and surged to again attack the red light that was Tonks, but the vines about Harry's sword sprouted large and yellow, and pinned the green curse against the darkness, holding it fast. It hung there, suspended in the darkness as Harry raised the orange sword above his head and plunged it down onto the twist of green. A great surge of something that looked like green lava began to erupt from the fissure, and Harry began to pull himself away when the snake on his sword opened its jaws wide and swallowed the green glow whole. In an instant it was over, and all that remained in the darkness was the red glow pulsating before him.

The orange sword faded in his hand, flashed brightly once more on his arm, and then disappeared in the dim light. Harry pulled back from this other place, the place where Tonks' life force now burned warmly if not brightly, and the vision of darkness before him began to coalesce with a vision of Tonks, the red glow fading to red cheeks. There was a gasp; it was from Hermione.

"She's alive," she breathed. Harry looked down to see Tonks still curled in the layers of her black robes, but her eyes were closed and her breathing regular. He sat back, winded and dizzy, but satisfied knowing that she was safe. Hermione helped Harry steady himself as he sat on the floor.

"What did you do?" she asked. "How... how did you...." There was a low groan from the other side of the great entrance hall. The spell on Snape was wearing off and he was coming around. "Harry," asked Hermione, "you cast the Killing Curse? Are you sure?" Her words filled the quiet hall.

"What? What was that?" Snape called out still on his back. He took to his feet and, rubbing his face, came over to the two Hogwarts students seated next to the Auror. Harry expected a snide comment, and he wasn't disappointed. Snape narrowed his eyes at Harry and said with a remarkable tinge of concern for Tonks, "What have you done this time, Potter?"

"I thought I killed her," Harry replied, holding Tonks' hand which was now warming in his own. "I thought..." but he couldn't finish.

"He used the Killing Curse, professor," added Hermione in a matter of fact tone, "thinking it was Voldemort attacking me."

"He what?" cried Snape. Quickly, he bent low to Tonks and felt her head with the palm of his hand. It was, in Harry's mind, a surprisingly tender touch. Harry wondered how Snape could show an ounce of compassion to anyone, let alone someone who had just hexed him. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that Tonks was a Slytherin. Snape held out his wand and bathed her face in a pale purple light, and a look of confusion crossed his face. "It was a Killing

Curse,” he whispered. His eyes slid to the corners and glared at Harry.

“I must take her to St. Mungo’s at once,” Snape said urgently, “but I can’t take all of you.” His eyes scanned the hall nervously. “Ms. Granger may be able to apparate that far, but I’m afraid you, Potter, are once again a disappointment. I can’t have you alone, and I can’t have you wandering because I know where you’d go.” Harry’s eyes met Snape’s, and reinforced that the professor was correct in that regard, he would run downstairs given the opportunity. Snape waved his wand and sealed the doors and fireplaces.

“Ms. Granger, please ensure your friend, Mr. Potter, stays out of trouble. At least until someone returns for you; it should only be a few moments.” With that he reached down and gently lifted Tonks into his arms. There was a loud crack and the two disappeared. Immediately, Harry ran over to the doors leading to the steps, and tried to open them.

“Alohomora!” he called.

“You’ll need a stronger spell than that one,” said Hermione. Harry turned at her and glared.

“You are going to help me, right?” Hermione looked at him and then looked away.

“Hermione!” yelled Harry. “I have to hurry!” He was sure it would soon be midnight, and he had no idea how long Draco could keep the real Death Eaters away from the Ministry. Tonks had said it would all be ready; all he needed to do was to get downstairs.

“They’re going to be back any minute, Harry,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady but failing miserably. Harry spun toward the sealed doors and started to ram them with his shoulder. “Harry!” she cried. He charged again, sending a large clank reverberating around the stony walls.

"I can't believe..." he said, turning to take another run at the walls. He knew he'd never get through, but it made him feel better. There was another crash, only this time Harry grimaced in pain. "Snape!" he hissed as he walked back from the doors his left arm limp at his side, his head tilted low so that he was glaring at Hermione over the top of his round glasses. He turned to the walls again.

"Stop it!" she cried. "Can't you see I want to help? Don't you know I want him back too?" Her eyes were swollen and tears began to drip indiscriminately down her cheeks. "It's too dangerous, Harry. I won't lose you! Not again!" She dropped her hands in her face and began to cry. Harry looked to the doors and then to Hermione. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, but instead he walked over and held her. Together they sat at the edge of the Fountain of Magical Brethren. He held her in his arms as her sobs quieted.

"You won't lose me, Hermione," he said softly. "Not tonight." Looking at the ripples of water in the fountain, he reached into his pocket and twiddled with the small vial there. He slipped his fingers passed the glass, pulled out two galleons, and tossed them into the churning water. "For Tonks," he whispered.

The air was still. Any moment now they'd be coming to take them out of here. Snape was probably busy trying to find someone else to gather Harry and Hermione so he could run back and be with his master as they attacked the torture chamber where the basin now sat waiting to be used. He smiled wondering what the look on Voldemort's face would be when he found the room empty, save for the bowl and Lucius Malfoy's blood. Hopefully, he would not take it out on Draco. Harry sighed. Sitting next to Hermione, he looked down at the spot where Snape laid unconscious.

"I can't believe I thought Snape was Ron," he said in the stillness of the night. "I thought... I thought he was dead... that you'd both been taken by the Dark Lord."

"Ron's safe," Hermione whispered, I made sure of that.

"Good," said Harry with a smile. "When I saw you talking in the Great Hall at dinner, I thought for sure you were plotting something together."

"He wanted to," she said with a sniff and wiping her eyes. "Ron promised me he wouldn't read my thoughts, but I think he slipped. He asked where I was going, and if it was after Tonks."

"What did you tell him?" Harry asked.

"Well, I had to give him something. I couldn't have him here. Tracking Tonks was my job and I wasn't going to lose..." she stopped herself and gave a little shudder. Harry pulled her close again.

"You said it yourself, Hermione," he said warmly. "You can't do it all on your own. Sometimes we need to recognize that we're not alone, that our friends are here to help." She turned and smiled at Harry, then gave him a hug.

"You're right, Harry," she said with her hand against his face. "I'm sorry." She held his gaze for a moment and a small glimmer flashed within them. "Let's open the doors," she said quickly standing to her feet.

"Are you sure?" he said with a smile.

"Yes!" said Hermione, exuberance filling her voice. Harry's heart skipped as they walked across the great expanse of polished wood.

"I wish Ron were here," said Harry with excitement.

"Wait till he hears the story," said Hermione brightly. "Here we are battling it out at the Ministry, and he's all alone at home."

"Home?" asked Harry.

"Yeah," she answered with a mischievous smile. "I told him I was tracking Tonks, and was sure she was going back to the Burrow to reestablish it as Voldemort's base." She pulled her wand ready to open the doors. "I hope he doesn't get too mad when he gets there and finds it's still deserted." Harry immediately grabbed Hermione's arm.

"The Burrow? You sent Ron to the Burrow?" Hermione nodded. "He's flying there on my Caduceus?" Again she nodded, only this time she was picking up on the anxiety in Harry's voice.

"He had mentioned it, but I didn't think..."

"Oh, no!"

"What, Harry?" she asked nervously. "What's wrong?"

"Hermione, Voldemort... he returned to the Burrow last week."

"That's not possible," she began, but as she looked into Harry's eyes she could see that he was unflinching. "Harry, how can you be sure?"

"You may be chums with Snape," said Harry, "but I have my own source."

"Malfoy," Hermione breathed, and with that thought ensconced in her mind a look of horror filled her eyes -- Ron was in trouble. Harry wasn't sure how she had put it all together, but he didn't care. The important thing was to rescue Ron. He wanted to leave immediately, but they'd have to wait for someone to return. What was taking so long? Hermione was not taking it well.

"I... I sent him there," she said blankly. "They'll kill him."

"He knows to be careful," said Harry. "He won't just go barging in to attack..." Hermione glared at him with eyes that said they both knew that Ron was action first, thought later. She reached up and touched his face again.

"Tell them where we are, Harry." Her eyes were resigned to her fate, and resolute at what she must do. There was a loud snap, and she was gone.

"Hermione!" Harry yelled, but his voice just echoed in the resplendent hall. He slumped against the wall.

“Hey, you!” a voice cried out. It was the sleeping guard that Harry had seen. At last, he thought, someone to help. He started running toward the groggy wizard.

“I need help!” Harry called.

“Stop right there!” the guard yelled.

“It’s urgent! I really need...” There was a red flash of light that rolled directly at him. Harry pulled his wand and threw a shield charm with no time to think of where to deflect the attack. Unfortunately, it ricocheted the stunning spell straight back at his assailant. The guard was hit squarely in the chest and flew back against the wall, falling once again to the floor unconscious.

For a moment Harry considered reviving him, but hesitated, thinking about the fight that might ensue. Then a wild thought crossed his mind; it would only take seconds if he did it right, but he’d have to move quickly.

“Sirius!” he whispered excitedly. With his wand he inscribed on the wall above the guard a note in flaming gold letters: We’ve gone to the Burrow to save Ron. Voldemort’s there. He ran back to the doors only to realize that Hermione had not yet opened them.

“Damn!” he cursed. He kicked the huge slabs of polished mahogany with his foot, sending a sharp stabbing pain through the ankle he had twisted in Advanced Apparation.

“Ouch!” he yelled. Then a queasy nervous feeling began to fill his stomach as he considered the possibility. He could do this... he just needed to focus.

The thought of traveling through hundreds of feet of pure stone was really not appealing at all. One false thought and he’d probably be splinched where no one would find him again. He slipped out his wand and focused on the picture in his mind that was more vivid than any of his other memories: the stone dais where Sirius slipped through the veil.

Vision - An image appeared before him of the ancient stone room below.

Channel - With pure concentration, Harry stepped through to the other side.

Reconstruction - His body reassembled upon the first large stone step, just up from the floor where the dais sat underneath the Curtain of Phenolem. It was the same spot where he stood with Neville when he watched Sirius fall to the other side.

The room was exactly as he remembered. Large stone steps climbed upward from the dais to the doors that exited back into the Ministry corridors. He imagined the wizards and witches that would sit here, looking down on the accused before they were killed, or later cast alive through the veil. He would have liked to think it a barbaric time, but wasn't sure his own was much better. Candles lined the dais and on its edge were the golden basin, a flask of red liquid, and a thin tube -- the Black key. Harry took a step down when a shadow fluttered from behind the stone archway covered by the veil. He held his wand at the ready. He heard the voice before he saw the face.

"Ah, Harry! Thank Asha you could make it." Out stepped Grigor Darbinyan, wearing neat blue robes. He held no wand, and instead was holding his hands out in an open gesture of welcome, his face smiling.

"I was getting worried," said Grigor, "there isn't much time." Harry held his wand and narrowed his gaze. This only made Grigor smile more broadly. "You are worried, I see. A prudent approach and I dare say I'd do the same in your position." He sat up on the dais with his hands folded in his lap. "Tonks and I have been planning this for months. Where is she by the way?"

"She was called to a fight outside Ipswich," Harry answered cautiously. "She said I was on my own."

"Pity, she did so want to be here when we fetched your godfather." Grigor leaned toward Harry who had taken a few more steps in the direction of the curtain. "He is your godfather, isn't he?"

“Yes,” Harry said curtly. Stepping closer to the dais, Harry’s heart began to beat faster and faster. He was so close, but...

“Well, Tonks knew about the golden instruments in the Black family all along, and when she heard I was from Al Bsahri she thought I could help.” Grigor casually crossed his legs. “Well, I gave her what little information I could find, and believe me it wasn’t the easiest to come by.” He rubbed his neck. “Imagine my surprise when I discovered that there was a connection between the two of you. Finally, I thought, a way to apologize to Harry for almost killing him. It’s a grand gesture, don’t you think?”

Harry was growing unsure. Something in Grigor’s words made sense. It was almost mesmerizing listening to him as he told the tale. But was it fact or fiction? Harry wanted to believe, he needed to.

“There are Death Eaters coming,” Harry said flatly, wondering what the reaction would be. “Perhaps... Voldemort himself.” Grigor, however, seemed unconcerned.

“I’m well aware of our timetable, and you’re right, we have little time left. Grigor pulled his wand, and Harry held his higher. Grigor only chuckled.

Grigor cast a spell with a deep accent that, to Harry, sounded nothing like Armenian. A white glow erupted upward toward the ceiling, and then crept along the walls to the floor and finally filled the floor with an eerie white mist that hung low only a few inches from the ground. “An anti-apparation charm; we will be free from visitors for a few moments,” he said warmly. “Have you brought what we need?” Harry glanced down to his pocket, a move noted by Mr. Darbinyan. “Good... good. Bring it here, we must hurry. Unless I’m mistaken your godfather will be first to arrive, and then we can be on our way.” Grigor held out his hand and, almost ignoring Harry, turned to face the basin and blood upon the dais. Clearly, not a threatening posture if he wanted to attack.

Harry looked at the curtain, the ingredients on the dais, and Grigor essentially ignoring him save for the lone left hand extended in

Harry's direction waiting for the final ingredient. He could bear it no longer. Quickly, Harry shifted his wand to his left hand and entered his pocket for the vial with his right. It was the moment Grigor had waited for.

His motion was smooth and graceful as Grigor spun on Harry his wand outstretched. Harry reached for his own wand, but his hand was trapped inside his pocket for the briefest of moments. It was all the time Grigor needed. Harry felt his body freeze and he fell to the floor stiff, but wide awake. Grigor walked over to him and pulled the small vial from his pocket. His face wore a look of triumph.

"It's fortunate, Harry, that Tonks was called away. I was not looking forward to killing her too, and not totally sure I could pull it off. I guess it's all a question of what we're willing to sacrifice for family." He patted Harry on the face. "I'm sure she'll miss you dearly. Perhaps if there's time, I can return her cousin to her as I promised. It only seems fair." Grigor stepped back from the dais.

"But... first things first. There is one more step," Grigor greedily whispered to himself, "and I will be avenged." He turned back to face Harry and levitated him up toward the dais. Harry was sure he would be tossed bodily into the curtain. One way, he thought, to join Sirius, but certainly not his top choice. Then his body stopped and was set gently onto the stone slab next to the golden basin.

"I'm afraid, Harry," said Grigor, "I need one more ingredient. Well, not so much an ingredient as bait." He sighed deeply. "One Muggle who is really a wizard. Not something you can just go and buy at the local apothecary, eh, Harry?" He stepped close to Harry, leaning over his still body. "You see, I'm not the only one you fooled this summer. But it must remain our little secret." He held his wand over Harry's lips. "Don't say a word," he breathed, as if Harry had any hope of uttering a sound. A look of excited anticipation filled Grigor's eyes, while one of horror filled Harry's.

"Ah," said Grigor, "Midnight." He turned to face the far wall as a blue doorway appeared just above the first stone step. "Only family may pass," he whispered to Harry. In a bluster of mist, Harry could make out a person walking slowly forward. Whoever it was stepped out

onto the stone floor, and the doorway vanished leaving the wall still glowing white. Harry's hands began to perspire, and he was feeling very ill. The sensation overwhelming him was telling every pore of his body that the person entering was Voldemort. But family? The figure stepped close and leaned over him.

"Hello, Harry. It's good to see you again," she said with a smile. She leaned down and stroked the side of his face. Her green eyes were as piercing as ever, but her face had aged. Wrinkles creased the eyes and forehead, and streaks of grey filled her long, light brown hair.

"I believe you've met," said Grigor, but in case you haven't, let me introduce you. Harry, this is Emma, Emma Slate."

"Oh Grigor," she said with a tone of embarrassment. "Let's not be so formal." She looked down into Harry's eyes. "You can call me Anaxarete; in the end, all my lovers do." She leaned down and kissed his lips. "And in just a moment, you and I are going to become very close."

Chapter 69 - Sacrifice

Harry tried to scream, but immobilized all he could do was look past the wrinkled face before him and up at the stone walls. They were gray and roughly hewn, but glowed white with the magic of the anti-apparation charm Grigor had placed on them, a charm that only allowed family to pass. Harry's mind fumbled trying to understand what was happening and so he tried not to think about it, and instead focused on the ceiling. The last time Harry was here, he never noticed the gargoyles that lined the high walls. But then he never really looked up at the ceiling, seeing as how at the time he was being chased by Death Eaters. The stone creatures seemed to be watching, waiting with anticipation. On his back, his eyes open wide he couldn't help but consider that these creatures, these stones here were old, very old. He was frightened and the overly comforting voice of the aged Emma Slate was making things worse. It was as if she'd been through a time machine, her body and her voice had aged by at least forty years in the span five months; at that rate she'd be dead by summer.

"I promise, Harry," she said reassuringly, "it will only hurt for a moment, and then you and I will be together forever." Harry could feel her breath against his cheek. "It should have been you all along, darling." She sat up next to him on the dais patting his leg, and then sighed. "But I found Duncan first. Imbecile," she snapped darkly, "he couldn't even take his own life properly." Her voice softened again. "Do you know how many have killed themselves for me, Harry?" She asked the question like someone bragging about how wealthy they were. "I think maybe you would have and, if it hadn't been for Gabriella, I think I would have taken you instead. It must seem very strange to realize my sist-sis," she halted, "your girlfriend is a witch. I'd call myself that too, but I'm so much more, and soon we can share that together." She continued to gently stroke his cheek. Harry wanted to scream, to cry out, but he couldn't even twitch.

"Ana," said Grigor impatiently, "we haven't much time."

"Yes, I know," she answered. "The Lord will meet the Lady tonight. But I won't rush this like last time." Harry saw a flash of anger flare in

her eyes as she turned to face Grigor. "If you would have been there, none of this would have been necessary!"

"I didn't realize your advanced stage," he replied with deference, but Harry noted an undertone of irritation as if this had been repeated for the millionth time. Anaxarete may have noted it too because her next words were aimed more at Grigor than at Harry.

"You must understand, darling," she said stroking Harry's arms and looking into his eyes, "Grigor and I go way back. It was I that encouraged him to come to Al Bsahri, and it was I that welcomed him and Soseh to the school. If the poor man had half the skills as his wife...." She let loose a long forlorn sigh. "I was there at the birth of both their children. Our families were close, until An-Antreas..." she seemed to choke on the word and the pleasantness of her features grew hard. Quickly, however, she recomposed herself, "...until Antreas was of age to join Al Bsahri. Suddenly the walls came up and no longer were I and my husband allowed to visit the Darbinyan family. I thought, perhaps, he didn't want his son to grow up in the Dark Arts; many foolish wizards make such mistakes. But when Gabriella came to Al Bsahri, a school-first made possible because of ME," she said pointedly, "I knew it was something else." She shifted uneasily upon the dais.

"As the years of separation passed," she continued, "years of growth for the young Darbinyan boy, Antreas unfortunately faded from my memory. He was never spoken of, not even by Gabriella, and my thoughts were focused elsewhere. The wrinkles you now see on my face began to appear and my hair began to thin. It was time for the joining." Her eyes left Harry's for a moment and again her features hardened. "Never send boys to do a woman's job!"

"I was failing far too quickly, and the ceremony was hurried, although the timing with the rise of the Dark Lord was fortuitous. I would once again be in my prime, and I would take his side, or his power." These words were spoken as if she thought, perhaps, she would defeat Voldemort, if it were necessary. Something about her presence suggested she might win that battle.

“They found a Muggle boy that had wandered onto the school grounds. Yes, Harry, a Muggle. It always has to be a Muggle; someone like yourself with no magical ability at all. It makes it so much easier, you’ll see. They laid him next to me, and I must admit, I thought the eyes familiar, but nothing more. I have often been to the markets of Tripoli, and perhaps our paths had crossed. He was not as young as I would have liked, but still he would do.” Anaxarete brought herself up above Harry. She stood upon the dais as if to give herself a more foreboding figure, and the breeze rushing from the curtain causing her robes to billow afforded her the look she wanted.

“Imagine my surprise,” she cried out, her voice ringing off the walls, “when I discovered the vessel I was taking was not that of a Muggle, but a wizard!” Again, she was looking at Harry, but clearly speaking to Grigor. “Do you know what it feels like to have someone fighting your every move, thwarting your every thought? The boy’s punishment was to watch the deaths of his Muggle friends, but still he would not yield. So we left Lebanon in search of more fertile ground. Well, Harry, you can see what it’s done to my figure.” She smiled, and what was a moment ago a battery of fine teeth showed one or two missing.

“Knowing of the return and rise of Voldemort, I came to Britain, but the Darbinyan family followed me... followed Antreas.” She let out a sickly laugh. “Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer, eh, Grigor?” She sat back down next to Harry. “But we’re not enemies, are we Grigor? I had planned on using that pathetic excuse for a Muggle, Duncan, as an appropriate substitute. It was Grigor, here, who thought you’d make a better vessel. Get rid of the Muggle his daughter had fallen for, while providing me with another hundred years.” She leaned down awkwardly over Harry. “I always sensed you had the stronger energy. That’s why Gabriella fell for you.”

“I’ve been waiting patiently to fully reveal myself to the Dark Lord. I’ve sent him messages telling of my deeds, but never coming before his presence with a squib as a vessel. When I mentioned to him that I was killing you tonight he seemed eager to be here, but I told him he must wait till it was finished. I can’t imagine his interest, Harry, but the secret ritual is not for his eyes. It is for our people only, isn’t it Grigor?” Her voice was smug, superior.

“Yes, my Lady,” answered Grigor quietly.

Harry’s eyes were filled with pure venom. He wondered what Voldemort would say hearing that he was not worthy to see the ceremony she was about to perform. Here was the witch that had caused so much grief around Europe. She nearly cost one friend his life and had killed another, and the thought that Gabriella’s father was in it with her was almost more than he could bear. But why, he thought, did Grigor go through all the antics of helping Duncan, of working with Tonks to release Sirius, if his plan had been to give Anaxarete Harry’s body, or life force, or whatever it was that was about to happen to him? Harry saw Grigor jump up onto the dais.

“Here my dear,” he said, “let me help you.” He maneuvered around Harry to Anaxarete who stood between Harry and the veil. She was bent down stroking Harry’s face, and Harry saw the wrinkles continue to deepen into large creases upon her face. HE’d been wrong; at this rate she’d be dead within a week. “We really must hurry. He will arrive soon.”

“Yes, yes,” said Anaxarete, looking very tired as she stroked Harry’s arm. Suddenly, her eyes caught a glimpse of the scar on Harry’s arm just as Grigor innocently held out his hand to offer support. It was an innocent gesture, but one that Harry had just seen. His heart skipped. The aging witch blinked as if her eyes were not focusing properly, and then leaned over against that hand preparing to sit next to Harry. But she never had the chance. In the time it takes a Doxy to seize an incompetent wizard’s wand, Grigor had twisted Anaxarete about. She reached for her wand, but too late. Her body plunged through the veil with a look of shock and surprise on her face, reminiscent of the look Sirius held in his eyes before he too was lost to the other side. At the same instant, Harry noted a flash of blue light that filled the room, not something he had seen when Sirius fell.

Harry’s eyes widened with astonishment. It had been a ruse all along! Had Tonks known? His heart was jumping for joy waiting to be released by Grigor. The wizard jumped to the floor and slapped his hands against each other as if washing them from the filth he’d just touched.

“First things first,” he said hurriedly. “Asha, I thought she’d never shut up.” He moved over to Harry’s side and quickly arranged the instruments next to him. “Sorry I didn’t have more time to explain, Harry.” Again, Harry waited to be released, but the release never came. “As I said, I need a Muggle who’s really a wizard. I suppose I could have gathered two, but you were just too perfect a fit. I’m sure Gabriella will approve when she has her brother back.” He leaned over and patted Harry on the face. “We all make sacrifices, Harry, and it’s not like you’ll be dead.” Again he arranged everything at Harry’s side like Hermione preparing to tackle one of Snape’s more difficult potions.

The key to futures past and present

Depends on wit and wile

Blend the three and turn the key

Use wisdom for the dial

Harry could hear the Black key slide into the basin and click into place. The runes were then selected as the gears spun tick after tick.

Liquid of life that springs eternal

From birth of light to death infernal

Welled from source of endless magic

To bring back those whose loss was tragic

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Grigor pour what looked like about a quart of the water from the vial Harry had. He put the cap back on, and slipped it into the breast pocket of Harry’s robes. “Keep it safe, son,” he said softly. “We may find another use for it later.” Grigor turned to the flask of blood, lifted it carefully and slowly poured it in.

Liquid of life that courses pure

Split in spite without a cure

Yet saved from death by hated foe

Who stopped the ebb and staved the flow

“Soon, Antreas,” he shouted at the curtain, “I shall hold you in my arms again!”

“Hold who in your arms, Papa?”

Hearing her voice, Harry’s bodied prickled, and at the same time he saw Grigor spin nearly knocking the basin of blood over.

“Gabriella!” he cried in shock, and then said something sharply in Armenian that Harry couldn’t understand.

“No, Papa,” she answered, drawing nearer, “he didn’t want me here. I read his thoughts.”

Grigor cursed, and said something more.

“No, Papa,” she said calmly once again, “I put it down once before. I think I’ll hold it in my hand. It would be the prudent thing, don’t you think?”

Harry still could not move to see Gabriella, but he knew she was drawing nearer, wand drawn.

“Why is Harry...” she began, but Grigor cut her off.

“This is for Antreas!” he cried. “I can bring him back to us, Gabriella!”

“That’s not possible, Papa.”

“Yes it is!” snapped Grigor. “But I need a vessel for your brother’s spirit... and Harry’s it.”

“My brother was murdered!” snapped Gabriella.

“HE WAS TAKEN!” screamed Grigor viciously. “He was swallowed whole like Jonah by the whale and I’m going to make her spit him back out!” He turned from his daughter and the dials began to spin.

Liquid of life in molten state

Cast to let its brethren mate

Spin the lock and turn the key

To let our captured allies free

There was high pitched whirring sound as the dial of runes began to spin. Then it stopped and clicked into place.

“Then let Harry go!” she cried.

“I can’t,” yelled Grigor consumed by the action of the basin. “I won’t lose him again.” There was a burst of red light that shot high over Grigor’s head.

“Papa, you’re not making sense,” Gabriella said, her voice quavering. “Please, stop.”

“Gabriella, your brother’s spirit was taken by Anaxarete. I tracked her to London and have been waiting for her to weaken. It was only a matter of time. This... this curtain I have always known about. I have thrown Ana and your brother to the other side, and in that realm their spirits have been freed from each other. Harry here serves two purposes. First, with the willing assistance of Nymphadora, he brought us the tools and the ingredients we need to free those from beyond.” He turned to Harry. “I think she suspected I was serving Voldemort,” he smiled. “But she was too eager to bring her cousin back, always blaming herself for not killing the witch that killed him.” Grigor’s face grew grim. “I know all too well that sense of guilt.”

The key to futures past and present

Depends on wit and wile

Blend the three and turn the key

Use wisdom for the dial

“But, Papa...”

“We can release the spirits from beyond! We can release your brother!” A thin mist began to roil up from the basin. “Those that passed through last, return first. It is likely that Anaxarete, the stronger of the two, will hold tight to the corporeal vessel the two shared. If so, your brother may emerge in spirit only. That’s what we need Harry for.”

“Papa, no!”

Select the mark to throw them hence

Select the mark to keep them

Select the mark to bring them whence

the darkness now doth steep them

“The mark is set for their return,” he whispered. Then he looked into Harry’s eyes once again. “Wouldn’t you give your own body to bring back her brother?” Then he turned to Gabriella. “The body is but a shell, dearest daughter. Antreas will take this shell and, with the spell, form it to his will. Harry will become the brother you knew just before he was taken.” He turned back to Harry. “Of course, Harry, you’ll have to be near death when he arrives... weak enough for him to take control.” Grigor pulled out his wand. “Welcome to the family, my son.”

A blast of red light filled the room and Grigor slammed head long into the stone dais. A gash of blood ran down his face and into his eye. He blinked reaching up and spinning the last rune into place.

Set the mark before the brew

to slay the ignorance once thought true.

Then as the three mix into one,
and breathe the mist through which they'll come,
spirit, soul, and purity,
protect yourself from enmity.

Grigor fell to the floor out of Harry's sight. "Daughter," he whispered weakly, "be prepared if Antreas is not the first." Harry heard the clatter of Grigor's wand fall to the floor.

A great golden mist began to roil up out of the basin above Harry's head. It was being slowly drawn toward the veil and clung to it slowly creeping its way to the top of the archway. It looked as if someone had taken the veil and dipped it in gold. Gabriella rushed to the dais, grabbed her father's wand, and leaned upon Harry kissing him hard.

"Are you okay?" she asked, but Harry couldn't move. "Oh, sorry." She stepped back and released him from the hex. Harry sat upright and pulled her close.

"We need to go," he breathed.

"You can't leave, Harry," said Grigor slyly. "Only family may pass, in or out."

Suddenly, there was a great rushing of wind that emanated from the curtain. Harry looked up. The band of golden mist had reached the top of the archway. He slipped down from the dais, Gabriella in his arms, and together they backed away from the veil until their backs hit the stone wall. A great stench filled the room... the smell of death.

"Wands ready!" cried Harry.

A shadow filled the frame of the archway and hung there for what seemed to be an eternity. Slowly, it coalesced into the figure of Anaxarete. Her form was whole, corporeal, but her appearance was more skeletal than human. Only a few strands of gray hair hung down

from her balding head. Her face was pulled back and sunken and the skin on her arms seemed to be peeling away. In her hand, however, was a wand, and in her eyes a piercing green flame. She looked to the dais and finding it empty scanned the room. She stepped out onto the stone slab, her toes nothing but bones, and found Harry huddled with Gabriella against the wall. A smile appeared upon her face revealing that no teeth remained.

She was ready to kill Harry, to take his vessel for her own, when she saw it in his hand -- eleven inches of holly. There was a look of confusion in her eyes, and then a fury flamed bright.

"NO!" she cried in a low guttural breath. She looked about and found Grigor, glaring back up at her, a look of victory on his face.

Anaxarete's piercing eyes raged like emeralds burning green. When she raised her wand, both Harry and Gabriella responded casting spells directly at her. She deflected Harry's, but Gabriella's hit true. It knocked her off the dais and onto the stone floor next to Grigor. There was a tremendous snap as her left leg split in two. The flame in her eyes dimmed, but the hatred remained. She flicked her wand one last time and this time a blast of green light streamed from the stick of wood clutched in her bony fingers. It struck Grigor in the chest, and he cried out in agony.

"Feel the pain," the hag gasped, "before you die." She tried to strengthen the spell, only it was too much for her; whatever life force she had remaining was spent. The green light faded and died. She tried to heave another gasp of air, but as she did her entire body began to crumble in on itself. She withered and died like a fallen flower until all that was left was a pile of powder that was blown away by another gust of breeze from beyond the veil.

Gabriella burst from Harry's arms and ran to her father.

"Papa!" she cried, leaning down at his side. Grigor turned and looked up at her. Harry was shocked that he was still breathing. Here truly was an amazing wizard, and if he had but half the skill of Soseh.... Gabriella held her hands to her father's face and closed her eyes.

She would try to heal him, Harry knew, but she winced and pulled away. Her body shuddered and she began to cry.

“No, my daughter,” he breathed, and then Grigor looked up at Harry. “I won’t have to kill you now, child.” His breath was thin and faint. “We have another vessel.” A look of fierce determination filled his eyes. “We can use me.” Harry stood in astonishment as Grigor turned himself to his knees and lifted up to the dais. Reaching with a quivering hand he reset the dial on the basin and collapsed back onto the floor.

“I believe,” Grigor wheezed, “this is yours.” He reached into his pocket and tried to hand something to Harry, but his hand fell to the floor. From his fingers rolled a brilliant red ball of stone flecked in glittering gold... the Heart of Asha.

“The stone!” Harry cried, and he snapped it up instantly. Having healed Tonks, he knew he would be unable to help Grigor, but with the stone there was hope; with the stone...

“I can use this!” exclaimed Harry. “I can save you, Grigor!” Gabriella’s father was too weak to even look back up at Harry, but gave a small laugh.

“No... no you can’t,” he said and then gently smiled. “It is forbidden.”

“But...” Gabriella grabbed Harry’s arm, and shook her head. Her eyes were overflowing with sadness. Reluctantly, Harry gently slipped the stone into his robes, into a deep and hidden pocket where slept a small puff of fur that Harry had taken to carrying with him over the last few weeks. With Grigor’s last ounce of strength he touched his daughter’s face.

“Tell, Mama, I’ll always be near, listening to her stories, and breathing in the wonderful aroma of the dolmas.” He coughed, and then said desperately, “Gabriella, you know the spell!”

“Papa, I can’t.”

"You must," he commanded, and then his hands fell limp to his sides. "Otherwise... you lose us both forever." A breeze from the veil blew Gabriella's black hair across her face and into her wet eyes. She and Harry looked up to see the curtain flutter as a wisp of white emerged through its golden sheen.

At first it looked like a ghost, but held more substance than Sir Nicholas. The form was that of a young man, his face concerned. When he saw Gabriella the expression brightened and he glided closer, but then he saw his father and his face fell. Gabriella looked frightened, not certain what to do. Harry stood behind her and gently touched her shoulders as they looked up at the spirit of her brother.

"Save him," he whispered, "if you can."

Gabriella wiped her face with her sleeve and nodded in agreement. Trembling, she held up her hands and began a chant in a tongue Harry had never heard before. Her voice grew louder and stronger with every verse and he saw a blue glow appear about her fingers; the trembling vanished. He heard her invoke the name of Asha, as she pointed her wand at her father and the glow of her hands traveled down the shaft of ash while the small engravings on its side suddenly flashed a brilliant white. A swirl of glowing blue mist spun in towards Grigor's chest.

"Antreas Darbinyan!" she cried out, and the spirit that was her brother seemed to be caught up in the swirl, spinning inward toward their father. She held her wand steady as the blast of blue penetrated her father's chest and with it Antreas' life force. "Good bye, Papa," she whispered. She shuddered, the blue light extinguished, and she fell backward into Harry's arms. The golden curtain still fluttered in the breeze as the two watched the transformation take place.

The features of the man crumpled before them began to change. His wrinkles thinned and his hair darkened. The bags under his eyes disappeared and the veins that were raised on the back of his hands vanished. He became the very figure of the specter they had just seen float out from the curtain -- Gabriella's brother, Antreas. Harry was stunned as the young man opened his eyes. They were a

brilliant azure blue and had a penetrating kindness behind them. There was another burst of air from beyond the veil.

“Sirius!” Harry cried. He stood up at the dais and ensured that the basin’s ring of runes was set in the correct position; all was perfect. His heart began to race with anticipation. Again the golden sheet became translucent, revealing the faint outline of a figure just behind. Harry looked at the top of the archway in eager anticipation when he noticed the white glow on the ceiling above begin to recede. Past the gargoyles, the gray of the walls poured down against the white on either side as if an enormous bucket of paint had been poured on top and slid down the stones. The white mist that was floating on the floors evaporated away.

“No,” Harry whispered to himself. He looked down and saw Gabriella hugging her brother. Harry’s hands flat against the top of the dais, the figure through the veil grew slightly more distinct, but still he could not make out its features. It had to be Sirius... it had to. Harry looked at the walls again. “No,” he repeated as a wave of nausea filled his insides. He clenched his teeth in anger; not now! There was no scar on his forehead burning into his brain; there didn’t need to be. Harry knew all too well what was about to happen... Voldemort was coming.

Chapter 70 - The Power That Lies Within

Deep in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic, ancient stone walls, roughly hewn, watched as the young wizard cast panicked glances on every side and into every corner. These stones had seen many deaths, many horrors, and had come to expect the worst from wizards and witches. But this wizard... this wizard was different. They sensed that first last year when he burst through their doors chased by evil. They felt the anguish of his heart call out when he lost his loved one; something they had rarely felt even in the oldest of days. Tonight, on the night of the full moon, when they helped guide his path into this chamber they felt a new purity in his spirit and were happy for his first victory over darkness. They had grown weary through the centuries of the travesties performed in the name of righteousness and they, like the wizard with the glasses by the dais, sensed the impending battle. How many more must be murdered in this chamber? There was a great groan and the stone floor shuddered. Tonight, it would end.

Gabriella let out a short shriek as the small earthquake came and went. Harry was oblivious, looking at the walls and back through the roiling golden mist. Why hadn't he remembered this feeling upstairs? He should have known then that it wasn't Voldemort floating before Hermione. The feeling tumbling his insides was new, untested, yet the nausea was now crashing within telling him what was about to happen. He gazed intently at the figure still forming behind the veil. If it was Sirius, he was nearly through, but so was....

"Hide!" he screamed to Gabriella and her brother Antreas who still looked as if he were in a state of shock. Only, there was no place to hide. Aside from plunging into the veil, the singular way to leave was up the great slabs of stone steps and that would mean leaving the basin behind for Voldemort to control, and if Harry were to spill it now Sirius would be lost forever.

"Run!" he yelled. "Get out, they're coming!"

Without asking, Gabriella heaved hard to help a much larger Antreas to his feet, but both she and Harry knew that there was no way her brother would be able to climb the steps. Harry pulled his wand to

cast a locomotor spell, but it was too late. In the same instant, the air filled with the sound of popcorn cracking in every direction. Hooded Death Eater after hooded Death Eater filled the stone arena. Nearly two dozen black robed wizards, some of them quite short when compared to the others, surrounded the three still standing at the dais. Harry and Gabriella held their wands at the ready as Antreas knelt weakly back to the floor. There was no sign of Voldemort, but Harry sensed that the Dark Lord was close; he'd simply sent his henchmen to clear the way for his meeting with the Lady. A meeting that would never come, at least not in the way Voldemort had hoped.

"Where are you, Tom?" thought Harry. "Come out come out wherever you are."

As the Death Eaters oriented themselves to face Harry and his friends, he pulled Gabriella closer and pushed her down next to Antreas beside the stone dais for what little protection it could provide, at least from one side of the room.

A short squat wizard to his left seemed to take offense to the motion and raised his wand, but a voice Harry knew all too well drawled out.

"Stop, you idiot!"

The short wizard lowered his wand and held his head down, backing away from Lucius.

"Why," Harry thought, "would they not want to blast him?" But then a glimmer of golden mist caught his eye, and he knew what they were after. Anaxarete was to release Voldemort's army for him, perhaps as a wedding present of sorts. If the basin spilt the curtain would close and Voldemort's army would be lost. He straightened himself, steadying his wand at Lucius Malfoy.

"Still in charge then, Malfoy?" he asked with an impudent tone. "Or did you have to give up more parts to stay in his good graces?" There was no answer as the ring of Death Eaters edged in more closely, a few stumbling trying to negotiate the steep steps. "Let's see... Peter gave up his hand, you gave up an arm, when does Bellatrix give up her neck?" He was hoping to provoke a response, and he did.

"Where is she Potter?" demanded Bellatrix from behind her mask. She was two to the left of Lucius and kept looking all about. It was unusual to hear her so nervous. The ring of black robes edged down and in once again. Harry considered using his wand as he glanced at Gabriella and then to Antreas. She shook her head; Antreas would not be able to help, and even if he could they had no chance of defeating so many. Then an idea came, and he pointed his wand sharply at the basin.

"One more step and she'll be lost in there forever!" he cried, hoping they'd believe the lie.

"You fool!" Bellatrix howled. "You pushed her through?" Then she began to cackle. "Well, if he wasn't going to kill you before, boy, he will now. And if he doesn't," her voice grew sinister, "she will."

"She won't kill anybody if I blast the basin," Harry threatened. He could see the figure growing more corporeal behind him.

"Is she coming?" whispered one of the Death Eaters excitedly. "Is that her?" Nearly all looked at the figure coalescing behind Harry.

"Kill the redhead," hissed a high cold voice near the entrance to the death chamber. Harry looked up and knew at once it was Voldemort; he could see him -- he could feel him. Without hesitation, the Death Eater to the right of Lucius pulled the black hood off of his nearest companion to reveal Ron Weasley, his voice silenced by a silencio spell. Lucius spun on the spot and lifted his wand to kill Ron.

"No, wait!" called another Death Eater whose voice stalled Malfoy. Harry didn't need to see under the hood of the shorter wizard; it was Draco, Lucius' son. Draco turned to Voldemort who was gliding down from the top of the stone steps. The Dark Lord's eyes flashed red; Draco knelt low. "My lord, this one is a Legilimens, the one that brought back the Longbottoms. Inside the castle he would be very useful... with your guidance." With an evil grin, Voldemort moved lower and raised his wand.

“Crucio!” he sang. From thirty feet away, the spell struck Lucius squarely and he cried out in agony. A moment later Voldemort stopped the spell. “Lucius,” he said as softly as if the two were sitting down for tea, “why did you not tell me the boy reads minds? Surely Severus brought this to your...”

“I did not know my... Ayyyy!” he screamed again as Voldemort struck him one more time for the interruption. As soon as he stopped, he turned to Harry. The Dark Lord looked intrigued.

“Harry... Potter,” he sneered, emphasizing the P and looking as if he beheld some grotesque creature chained inside a cage. Then he gazed passed Harry at the figure continuing to take shape behind him. Voldemort’s eyes were filled with curiosity and interest; it was his fascination with that boundary between death and life, and the Curtain of Phenolem was a very dark and ancient magic. Harry imagined that the last time Voldemort held the same expression was at Hogwarts when he was simply Tom Riddle. The moment stood frozen: Harry threatening to destroy the basin, Voldemort trying to understand the magic at work behind the curtain, when the Dark Lord let out a short laugh. “I warned her of your ingenuity, of your skill... traits you have undeservedly pilfered from me.” Voldemort bared his teeth and revealed rows of sharp stumpy points lining his gums. “Unmask the girl!”

Further to the left of Ron, a Death Eater slipped off another mask and there stood Hermione Granger a deep gash across her face was still bleeding down her neck. Again, Voldemort laughed, but it was not jovial in the least. To the contrary it was a threatening laugh, an ominous laugh.

“Six Death Eaters!” scorned the Dark Lord. “Can you imagine, Harry? It took six to capture this mudblood and bring her here alive.” He glanced about the room. “I must say my collection is wanting.” Then he glared at the golden curtain. “But that shall soon be rectified, thanks to you, boy.”

Voldemort continued to approach ominously toward Harry, and soon he was only a few feet away. Harry could clearly see the slits in his read eyes, the flattened face, but worse was the smell. It rivaled that

of the breeze still streaming from the curtain. Then Voldemort took note of Antreas and Gabriella hunched on the floor by the dais.

“Ah, more friends of yours, Harry?” He flicked his wand and Gabriella and Antreas flew across the stone floor and rammed straight into Hermione taking the Death Eater next to her down as well. Harry raised his foot over the basin, precariously balancing on the other.

“Harm them, Tom,” shouted Harry, “and I’ll smash it, I swear.”

“YOU impudent...” Voldemort flicked his wand as if swatting a fly and Harry went sailing across the floor, smashing his head into the stone wall above his friends, only to crash down on the floor. For a moment, he couldn’t see -- all was white, but he could hear the Death Eaters roar with laughter. Harry knew his left arm was broken, possibly a rib on his left side, and he could taste the blood in his mouth as Hermione gasped. He felt her warm touch against his face

“What are you smiling for?” she asked in a whisper, as the Death Eaters continued to laugh.

“Tell the others,” he rasped hoarsely, “hold tight to each other; hold tight to me.” Once again, the great stone room began to tremble. And as it rumbled, raining pebbles and dust onto the floor, he heard Hermione whisper, and then Gabriella. The tremor quieted the laughter as Harry’s eyes slowly began to focus. He felt Hermione grab him from one side and Gabriella from the other, and he looked up at the dais where Voldemort now stood.

“We’re ready,” Gabriella whispered in Harry’s ear, although he wasn’t sure if she had moved her lips.

“When she emerges,” slithered Voldemort, “I will allow her to kill you if she desires. It can be my gift. Perhaps now she will understand why I am the most powerful wizard in the world.” His words were haughty, self-centered as if Voldemort had debated this fact before, and Harry thought he and Anaxarete would have made a wonderful couple. Alas, it was not to be.

Smiling about Ana's prenuptial death, Harry winced as he reached into his pocket and pulled, not the ball of cinnabar, but a small furry object no bigger than his hand. Around its neck was a golden ring through which Harry slipped his finger. Pull in case of emergency, Harry remembered. Well, if this wasn't an emergency, he didn't know what was. Still with blurred vision Harry looked up at the image of Voldemort standing on the dais. Next to him, through the archway and into the swirling mist, a figure was now emerging.

"She's arrived!" someone yelled.

"Hail, Anaxarete!" the room cried in unison. All the Death Eaters fell to their knees, only Voldemort stood his hand outstretched in welcome. Harry pulled the ring off the molamar and onto his finger, and then held tight with his one good arm to the back of the molamar's neck.

There was a snap as a Death Eater apparated into the death chamber upon one of the highest steps. He missed the mark and began to tumble down steep stone step after steep stone step, then finally came to rest on the floor next to the dais. Broken, he forced himself to look up at his master.

"They're coming!" he squeaked with a mousy voice. "Severus sent me to warn you!" And then he collapsed on the floor.

"Bloody fool," cried Lucius behind his mask. "The rat's shown them the trail!"

The room began to jerk in sharp swift shakes, as if the walls were laughing. Harry felt sand splashing against his hand as the molamar chewed away at the rock. He could feel the creature growing underneath him while at the same time it fell away. The walls began to shake more violently, and the floor beneath him began to sink. The dais was rocking back and forth, undulating beneath Voldemort's feet and causing him to stumble backwards. His foot landed squarely on the lip of the golden basin, flipping it over and spraying the liquid all over the lower portion of his legs. There was a blood curdling scream as Voldemort cried out in agony.

As Harry felt himself being pulled downward, his vision sharpening, he could hear more pops and snaps in the chaos. Aurors and members of the Order were flooding into the chamber above. Instantly, the room erupted with tremendous flashes of light.

“Draco, stand behind me!” cried out Lucius.

“What’s happening?” screamed Hermione as she, Harry, Ron, Gabriella and Antreas were being pulled underground behind the enormous living drill.

“It’s a molamar!” cried Harry, closing his eyes against the dust. With the Death Eaters distracted, Hermione summoned both her wand and Ron’s just as the chamber above faded from sight. Only flashes of colour filled the growing tunnel.

“I-I can’t hold on,” said Harry cringing in pain, “I need...”

“Arripio!” erupted in both his ears as both Hermione and Gabriella simultaneously cast gripping charms adhering the group to the back of the molamar as it continued to dig its way underground with amazing speed.

“Better,” said Harry still choking in the dust, but feeling a far sight safer than in the chamber above. The creature was astonishing, digging through stone as if swimming in water.

“Are you mad?” cried Ron. “We’ll be buried alive!”

“And back there is better?” questioned Gabriella.

Harry could tell they were digging deeper; their weight was resting comfortably against the soft dusty fur of the molamar. From Hagrid’s class Harry knew that as the molamar plunged on it left an ever widening hole behind where it had been, but the tunnel’s darkness made it impossible to see. Then, suddenly, the creature stopped.

“Lumos!” cast Ron.

They had dug a tunnel some ten feet wide that twisted down and away from the chamber above. In less than a minute, they had traveled at least one-hundred yards. Gabriella noticed the gash on Hermione's face and closed the wound with a blue light from her wand. There was a loud rumble as the creature lifted momentarily from the ground, and then a foul stench filled the air.

"Oh, that's bloody awful, that is!" cried Ron holding his hand over his face. "A molamar fart?"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the creature began again, twisting to the left in search of more organic material. By the light of Ron's wand Harry could see that they seemed to be traveling mostly through stone, and he grew a bit concerned that the only organic material nearby was the five of them stuck to the molamar's back.

"I could have gone all day without that!" yelled Ron.

"We can climb back up if you want!" yelled Harry.

They seemed to be twisting randomly in no particular direction. Harry wondered how Hagrid and Firenze had controlled the molamars to build the caverns beneath Hogwarts. A moment later Gabriella asked to see Harry's arm.

"It's broken," she said with concern.

"Yeah, I kind of figured that," said Harry, smiling back with the mask of a coal miner. Everyone's face was covered in dull black dust.

"Madame Pomfrey showed me a little trick," said Gabriella. As they bounced along the ground she held his arm in her hands and muttered a spell he didn't understand. He was about to tell her to make sure and leave the bones there, when he felt a cool sensation over the break that vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Better?" she asked.

“Brilliant,” he whispered, squeezing the fingers of his left arm. He looked back at the tunnel behind them. “You know, they might try and follow us,” said Harry, thinking out loud.

“Not with so many of the Order to fight,” said Ron emphatically, still holding his lit wand high. “They’d need to be possessed to care about the bunch of us. Why on earth would they want to...” and he stopped himself, remembering the prophecy of Harry’s fate. “Oh, right.” Ron positioned himself a little closer to his best friend.

“Well, Harry,” said the redhead defiantly, “Voldemort will have to take us all to get the one.”

“That’s right,” said Hermione, pulling her wand as well.

Gabriella simply squeezed his hand. Harry felt a warmth and closeness he had long missed. He felt energized, and remembered the strength Dumbledore gathered as he strolled along the corridors of Hogwarts with students at his side. It was a bit like the Four Musketeers; they all had their wands out, all that is except Antreas, who was still fading in and out of consciousness. The molamar stopped again; the creature and the tunnel it was creating had grown to some twelve feet across.

“Please no!” cried Ron. “Please, please, please...”

R-R-R-RUUUMBLE.

The explosion of gas lifted the creature and the five stuck to its back a few feet off the ground. Everyone groaned, Ron the loudest. The stench was twice as foul as before and made Harry’s eyes water.

“Move you foul beast!” commanded Ron, turning his wand around.

“Ron, no!” Hermione cried, but it was too late. A blast of red light emitted from his wand, and the creature squealed, eating its way straight upward. After about ten seconds they had climbed some hundred feet and the real possibility that the molamar might decide to put itself into reverse and crash downward had crawled into everybody’s mind. A few seconds later, it was no longer a concern.

The molamar breached like the squid out on the lake into a great room, its dim light nearly blinding relative to the darkness they had just escaped.

“Finite Arripio!” cried Gabriella and Hermione at once. The five fell to the wooden floor as the molamar plunged back downward.

“Rigamortus!” cried Hermione, striking the molamar in the back causing it to freeze in suspended animation.

“Reducto!” said Gabriella, and the molamar began to shrink.

“You two are a bit scary, really,” said Ron looking at the two women with rather self-satisfied expressions on their filthy faces. “You’ll, er... you’ll need to put that ring thing back on its neck or it won’t...”

“Harry, do you have its stasis ring?” asked Gabriella. He was a bit surprised that she knew about molamars, but then she lived much closer to the desert than Harry. He handed her the ring of gold that was still around his finger and she slipped it around the molamar’s neck. The five finally had a moment to relax.

“Is everyone, okay?” asked Harry, trying to slap the dirt from off his robes with his hands.

“Honestly, Harry,” sighed Gabriella. She flipped her wand and the dust fell from his robes as if it were being magnetically pulled back to earth.

“That’s a good one,” said Hermione excitedly, and pointed her wand at Ron. “I think I’ll have a try.”

“Not on me, you w-...” She cast the spell, but instead of pulling the dirt to the floor, it pulled all Ron’s clothes to the floor. “Hey!” he screamed trying to cover himself.

“That’s a good one too,” said Gabriella with a grin.

Soon four of them were clean; Hermione was exasperated that Ron refused to let anyone point a wand at him again, filthy robes or not.

They all took a moment to catch their breath and take in the scene around them.

Harry had never been with the Dursley's before, but he suggested that the room looked like a museum of sorts. The walls were wood, roughly cut into long planks that reached up to the ceiling some thirty feet high, but there were no windows. It was filled with collections of Muggle artifacts: fine sculptures and paintings, tapestries and toilet seats.

"Maybe we're in an art museum somewhere in London," Ron suggested.

"You don't find collections of toilet seats in an art museum, Ron," corrected Hermione, "unless it's a modern art museum." She shrugged her shoulders as they looked at the long rows of knick knacks.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Gabriella.

"We're probably miles from the Ministry," said Harry.

"No," a voice rasped from behind. They all turned to see Antreas pulling himself up on one knee his eyes blinking. He held his hand toward the wall, wanting to say something, but unable to find the words. Gabriella rushed to her brother's side as the others turned to the wall. Ron narrowed his eyes, then closed them. An instant later they were wide open.

"GET DOWN!" he cried. Everyone obeyed and in that same instant a huge stone slab flew through the wooden wall sending shards of splinters and rock everywhere. Harry and Hermione cast shield charms as the stone tumbled toward them, crashed, tumbled and crashed again flipping up and over their heads only to come to rest on the row of toilet seats. But then the seats exploded sending the stone slab back their way. Hermione and Harry couldn't turn fast enough as the slab was about to crush them.

"Hasrestra!"

The huge stone froze in mid air five feet over their heads and gently descended to the ground between Harry and a row of green telephones that bore small labels: Prop #221; Arthur Weasley, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office; Explodes when answered. Harry turned to see who cast the spell and found Antreas on his knees brandishing his father's wand.

"Papa!" gasped Gabriella. "Antreas, Papa is with you!"

Through the yawning fissure in the wall left behind by the large flat stone, streaks of light were jetting everywhere. Harry looked up and saw the same gray stone and immutable gargoyles staring down at the battle below.

"We're still in the Ministry!" cried Ron.

"Brilliant," said Hermione rolling her eyes. "Any more revelations, Ron? It's the warehouse from your father's old job!"

Harry was transfixed at the streaks of light filling the room on the other side. Nobody knew they were in the room next door. He began to walk to the hole in the wall and his hands began to tingle; Voldemort was still close. Harry moved to have a better view.

"Harry, no!" called Gabriella. "We must leave, now!"

He stopped to look back at the four of them. Antreas was now standing; he was taller than his father, and far more muscular. He too waved for Harry to leave.

"Gabriella's right," he said with a voice that hinted of his father. "We must leave before they discover our..."

"Presents!" hissed a high cold voice, snakelike and incensed.

Harry looked up at the entrance to the artifacts room and found Voldemort floating off the ground. His first thought was Tonks. From the shin down, Voldemort's legs were gone, and his robes tattered as if they were burned by acid. "The basin," thought Harry, remembering his last sight of Voldemort. He reached up to his breast pocket and

felt the vial beneath his robes; there was at least nine gallons of water remaining, he was sure.

The Dark Lord's red eyes were filled with rage and focused on one thing only -- killing Harry. If the water removed the evil within someone... Without a word, Harry ran and jumped headlong through the gap in the wall just as a jet of green light passed to his left further widening the fissure.

Harry entered the ancient arena of death to find it a shambles. Gargoyle heads littered the floor. The flat stone that had just blasted through the wall was the dais that once lay at the bottom of the chamber, although the archway and black veil remained, the golden glow was gone. There were bodies littered everywhere, but still more than a dozen wizards were battling, filling the room with resplendent colours as shards of stone flew in every direction. Harry didn't look to see who they were; his mind was elsewhere.

Before the year began, Dumbledore sat with Harry in Grimmauld Place and told him of the enemies he would need to forgive, enemies that he would need as allies to defeat Voldemort. "None of them deserve your hatred, Harry. What's more, the day will come when we will need many of these people, and more, to help us in the fight against Voldemort. Would it be possible to forgive them all without being asked? When you can, you will have accomplished that which I could not. You'll have tapped into the true power that lies within each of us. On that day, you'll be ready, Harry, and you'll know it." Tonight, in the Ministry of Magic, Snape had defended Hermione against Tonks and then turned to take the Auror to St. Mungo's to save her life; Draco risked his life to keep Weasels from being murdered; and even Grigor Darbinyan acting through Antreas saved Harry and Hermione from being crushed beneath the tumbling stone dais. The sequencing of events had led him inextricably on a path to this one moment. What was the true power of the falls? Harry slipped the vial from his pocket and, holding it tightly in his fist, he closed his eyes and thought of all his enemies, even Bellatrix Lestrange.

"I forgive," he whispered, as blast after blast echoed in the chamber around him. He opened his eyes and felt a warmth flow from his heart and into the vial; it flashed a brilliant white then dimmed looking

almost invisible against the flesh of his hand. Harry levitated the vial high above the fissure near the face of an aged gargoyle. For a moment he looked at the stone creature's features... there was something in the eyes.

A blast of green swept past his face breaking the trance and he turned to run, but tripped over a body sprawled out on one of the great stone steps. Facing the fissure, crawling backwards on his hands, he waited for Voldemort to appear. He didn't have to wait long. Ignoring Harry's friends in favor of his singular prey, the Dark Lord floated into the gap with the solitary focus of destroying Harry once and for all. His snake-like face was oblivious to the mayhem about them.

"Your time has come to an end, Potter... a mosquito that I am now ready to swat." Blasts of light from the warehouse for misused Muggle artifacts framed the fissure where the Dark Lord floated striking him in the back, but they had no effect. Voldemort lifted his wand.

"Zipper-Pitch!" cried Harry, thinking of something of which Voldemort would have no understanding... a game. A bright green light spit forth from Harry's wand, but traveled slowly, no faster than a falling Quaffle toward Voldemort. It was an absurd spell really and, worse than that, it was well off the mark clearly heading high over the Dark Lord's head.

"Is that the best you can do, Potter?" he crowed. "Is that what they now teach at Hogwarts, pathetic spells cast by pathetic wizards? I should have crushed you long ago." The light from Harry's wand slowly floated towards its target, but Voldemort, ignoring the floating fairylike glow, was still framed inside the wall. He needed to come closer... and he was. The blasts that were raining down on Voldemort from behind were causing no damage, but they were moving him forward, ever so slowly into the chamber of death. Just a few more inches. Voldemort again raised his wand to kill. Harry stood to his feet in defiance, prepared to die if that was his fate, when there was a rush past his shoulder.

“Let me, my Lord! Let me kill him!” From behind Harry, stumbled Peter Pettigrew. The squat Death Eater nearly fell as had Harry, but kept his balance grabbing the burnt threads at the bottom of Voldemort’s robe and serving to pull the Dark Lord a few more inches into the room.

“Perfect,” thought Harry.

“Fool!” cried Voldemort. He looked down at Peter and was about to punish him, but hesitated. There was a green glint in Peter’s eyes as they looked up past Voldemort to the spell Harry cast; it had reached its target. In Peter’s pupils Voldemort saw the flash of green burst bright, he heard the tinkle of shattered glass, and... he looked up just as the nearly nine gallons of water from the falls of Hogwarts fell onto his face and soaked his robes.

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named began to scream as the evil in his eyes was burned away, but the sound was cut short as the evil in his voice was similarly consumed. Harry sat back breathlessly as Voldemort’s body began to rinse away beneath the plummeting waterfall, like a sandcastle vanquished by the rising tide. The room fell silent as all watched the Dark Lord’s black robes fall to the floor with nothing but a plume of black smoke curling upward toward the ceiling. They watched the murky cloud rise and then disappear into the mouth of the stone gargoyle directly overhead.

Someone shouted, “He’s dead! The boy killed him!”

At the same instant, the walls began to tremble more violently than ever. First dust, then pebbles, and then great slabs of stone began to tumble down. The floor beneath the archway that held the veil began to sink. A few pops reverberated from about the room as some fearful Death Eaters disappeared. Harry ran to Voldemort’s robes and with his wand flung them aside expecting to see Peter cowering beneath them. But the Dark Lord’s servant was gone as well. Even as the remaining gargoyle heads that had lined the ceiling began to collapse inward all around, a grand smile crossed his face. The twisting of his insides, all sense of sickness had vanished. Voldemort was gone; Harry had won.

“Father!” cried a voice from below that Harry knew quite well. He looked down to see Draco Malfoy perched on a finger of stone at the bottom of the death chamber. Beneath the Slytherin’s precarious perch gaped a cavernous hole. He clutched the stone as it shook beneath him; there was no wand in his hands. Harry jumped two steps at a time and reached the left side of the void that was widening beneath Draco. Harry didn’t think the molamar had dug such a cavern; something more was at work here. He reached out toward his friend.

“Take my hand,” called Harry as jets of colour still screamed across the room.

“Take mine!”

Lucius Malfoy had appeared to the other side of his son, and he too held out his hand, his only hand.

“Draco,” said his father, “he’s dead! The power is ours to control! Take my hand and we’ll begin again!”

“Don’t do it Draco!” cried Harry. “It’s not the path, you know it’s not!”

Draco smiled at Harry and leaned toward him holding out his hand. Relieved, Harry took it in his, but felt something cold and hard. Draco pulled his hand away leaving a small circular piece of metal in Harry’s palm. “So you’ll know what I saw in the mirror,” he said enigmatically, his two gray eyes firmly fixed on Harry’s green.

There was another rumble and the finger of rock began to give way. Both Harry and Lucius cried, “NO!” just as Draco leapt to his father’s side.

“It’s not about power, Harry!” he called as the rock continued to crumble all around. “It’s about family!” Draco’s lips curled in an unhappy smile. Lucius pulled him close, and together they disappeared from the chamber with a snap that he could not hear in the earthquake. Still clutching the circular disk, Harry stepped back from the widening hole beneath him. It seemed to be swallowing the

entire room. He took another step backward and felt the sharp poke of wood in his back.

“The blood traitor,” she hissed; it was Bellatrix. “Turn around, Potter. I want to see your eyes when you die.”

Slowly Harry turned to see Bellatrix Lestrange. Her face was slashed, streaked in blood, and her robes tattered and torn. She had been battling long and hard.

“I’ll kill them all for running!” she cried. “Don’t think he’s dead, little boy. He’ll return!” She tried to say these words with confidence, but Harry saw the flicker of doubt in her eyes. She raised her wand.

“Avada Ked...” She stopped; her eyes grew wide. Suddenly, the skin around her eyes thickened and enveloped the look of surprise beneath. Like a rapidly spreading fungus, her flesh kept growing until it covered her nose and mouth. She couldn’t speak; she couldn’t breathe. She dropped her wand and clawed at her face. Harry watched as her colour began to turn blue and she slumped to her knees. When she did, Harry saw who had cast the spell. Standing just five feet away watching Bellatrix suffocate to death, her wand still pointed at the witch writhing on the floor was Nymphadora Tonks.

“Tonks!” cried Harry, but the Auror in black robes didn’t register Harry’s voice. “Tonks, stop! You’re killing her!”

“Let her die,” Tonks replied with a hollow voice. “She killed...”

“Release her now, Tonks,” cried a stern wizard three steps up. “Or I’ll take you over my knee!”

Harry’s stomach rose to his throat, and he saw the same reaction in Tonks’ eyes. At the same time the two looked up to see Sirius Black, haggard as ever but wearing a broad white smile. Tonks jumped to grab him but he held out his hands and pointed to Bellatrix.

“Listen to Harry,” Sirius demanded.

Harry looked down to see the witch struggling on the floor; her wand slipped over the edge into the sinkhole below. Tonks released the spell just as Sirius sealed Bellatrix in glistening white ropes and levitated her body off the ground. Smiling, Harry turned to run to Sirius, but his feet gave way to the soft earth as it crumbled beneath him and he fell backwards into the gaping darkness.

“Harry!” he heard both Tonks and Sirius scream. The sound of his name seemed to fade as he disappeared into the nothingness.

Falling, he closed his eyes and focused his vision on the happiest moment of his life and with a loud pop apparated behind the witch and wizard he’d just left.

“Harry!” screamed Tonks still looking over the edge into the yawning hole. She moved to jump after Harry when he grabbed her by the shoulders.

“I think he’ll be okay,” said Harry. She spun to see him smiling at her.

“You!” Tonks yelled as she wrapped him in her arms. “If you ever...” Sirius grabbed them both.

“We need to get out of here, Harry!” he said forcefully. “The whole place is being sucked down.”

“Through there!” yelled Harry pointing at the fissure in the wall. Pulling Bellatrix with them, they crawled up over Voldemort’s robes and through the crack that had been split by the great stone dais. The others still inside the stone arena gave up the fight and apparated to places unknown. Harry was the last to escape, struggling over a large hewn stone as the wall behind him began to collapse completely away. Gabriella grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the artifacts room. She kissed his neck and held him close.

“You did it, Harry!” she said, trying to hold back the tears. “You did it!”

Looking back, they watched the great stone archway that held the Curtain of Phenolem plummet downward into darkness and disappear into the deep. The walls and floor stopped rumbling just as

suddenly as they started. Stepping back, Harry opened his dusty hand and looked at the small disk in his palm; it was silver or more likely white gold or platinum. Shaped like a thin coin it was polished flat to a high sheen. If it was a talisman, it didn't look like one. There were no engravings, no markings of any kind save for a small hole that might accommodate a chain; just his own reflection looked back at him from the glossy silver surface. Harry smiled and slipped the coin into his pocket, then he turned into the artifacts room and saw Ron, Hermione and Antreas next to Tonks and Sirius.

"We did it," he whispered.

Gabriella held him in her arms and they walked over the debris on the floor to his friends... to his family. He stopped in front of Sirius and looked up into his godfather's eyes. It was almost too good to be true, and he was at a loss for what to say.

"How, erm..." He swallowed. "How have you been?"

Sirius barked out a tremendous laugh and pulled Harry tight into his arms. Harry closed his eyes. It was real. He opened his own arms wide and ignoring the sharp pain in his ribs squeezed with all his might. The heaviness of his heart had lifted and light poured out from his soul. Great heaving sobs filled the air; everyone was crying. Finally, Sirius pulled away and held Harry's wet face in his hands.

"I'm fine, Harry. How are you?"

Harry blinked. "Never better."

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(Author's Note: A couple chapters more to go.)

Chapter 71 - The Return of Ebyrth

It's a wonderful thing really, what the heart feels when darkness passes and light shines brightly in its wake. Somewhat like the beautiful smell of rain after a storm. But the violent storm that had just swept past the Wizarding world took with it many spirits and the days that followed Harry's return to Hogwarts were filled with ceremonies and funerals, colorful celebrations and dark remembrances. Spring, however, blustery and beautiful, was not to be outdone and the flowers that bloomed brilliantly on the castle grounds spoke of rebirth and renewal. A new spirit had swept the land, and Professor Sinistra was singing its praises.

"Can you not feel it?" she asked the class as they approached N.E.W.T.s week. "The balance has been renewed!" And indeed Harry and the others had felt it, an energy that flowed from the world all around them that strengthened their magical abilities. On the eve before Gryffindor's match with Slytherin, Katie Bell revealed that she was an Animagus, and transformed into a peregrine falcon. She flew gracefully about the common room and Harry not could think of a more fitting creature for the Gryffindor Chaser. The sight helped diminish his disappointment that he would not be facing his arch rival in the air.

Draco did not return to Hogwarts after the battle at the Ministry and the entire school noted his absence. Rumors flew that his mother, Narcissa, had fled with Lucius and that Draco had been killed, swallowed by the pit that had opened up beneath the Ministry's death chamber. Harry, the only one who saw Draco disappear with his father, said nothing to the contrary. In his heart, there was still hope that Draco might someday return. A return that promised to be greeted warmly since Ron had told the story of how Draco had saved his life. It was a story that earned the redhead much more respect within the Slytherin walls where, with Voldemort gone, many of the students wearing green spoke out against the Dark Lord, none more fervently than Gabriella.

On the morning of the year's last Quidditch match, however, she demonstrated her true loyalties. Just after breakfast she kissed Harry on the lips wishing him luck, and then hexed him so that his hair

turned a brilliant green. He considered going bald, vanishing his hair altogether before flying out onto the pitch, but instead left it green as his own personal tribute to Draco. Once he was in the air on his Caduceus, all thoughts of death and exams slipped from Harry's mind. As the battle between Gryffindor and Slytherin went on, he couldn't help but grin every time he passed by the Gryffindor stands. There sat both Sirius and Lupin side-by-side cheering him on.

With Ron playing Keeper for Slytherin and Draco absent, the match unfolded as expected; Gryffindor scored only one goal and only after Ginny made a joke about Ron walking around the Ministry naked. Enraged, he moved out toward her just as Dennis slipped the Quaffle through. On the other end of the pitch, Slytherin scored at will. In the end, when Harry caught the Snitch, the entire stadium erupted in cheers, not so much for the victors of the Quidditch Cup, but rather for the love of the game and quite possibly because it was their first chance to cheer about anything since so many had died at the Ministry and during the retaking of the Burrow.

Both the Slytherin and Gryffindor teams were surrounded once they lit onto the turf of the pitch. Harry congratulated Ron for a match well fought when the coach of the Magpies, Bernard Bennegin, walked over to the redhead and the two disappeared into the gathering crowd. Harry was slapped soundly on the shoulder from members of every house. He was also hugged by many girls he didn't even know, a few more times than Gabriella cared for, as they made their way to the school feast.

That afternoon and into the night, all of Hogwarts celebrated as more than butterbeer found its way into a few students' gullets. It was the last chance to unwind before N.E.W.T.s started and everyone was taking advantage; fireworks swooped and blasted throughout the castle. In the Great Hall many parents came to eat with their children and the feast broke out onto the warm castle grounds lit by a soft evening twilight. Still sporting brilliant green hair, Harry and Gabriella were seated at a table enjoying their meal with the Weasley family, Lupin, Tonks and Sirius Black.

Harry's godfather had emerged from the Curtain of Phenolem the same as when he passed in, wand in hand and ready to battle. It had

taken him some time to understand that the new battle raging before him was different than the battle he had left. Although he would not speak of how much time he thought had passed beyond the veil. His body was whole, his mind clear, and his appetite ravenous.

“Gab,” Sirius asked, pointing at her plate, “are you going to eat that piece of chicken?”

“No,” she said with a smile, and passed him the leg. Sirius held it up to her in toast.

“I would never have believed it,” said Sirius smiling, “if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes -- a Slytherin offering Sirius Black dinner!”

“Hey,” injected Tonks, poking him in the ribs, “I was in Slytherin.”

“And have you ever offered me so much as a crumb from off your plate?” he queried indignantly. Tonks did not reply. “A dog remembers these things!” Everyone laughed.

“It’s the year for miracles, Sirius” said Arthur Weasley brightly. “You’re living proof. Tell us, what was it like behind the veil?” Sirius took a bite of biscuit and scooted out from the table still holding his chicken leg and walked toward the twins who were handing out fireworks free to any first year.

“Fred, George,” said Sirius still smiling, “tell me how you get the blue rocket to explode in the shape of Dumbledore’s face.” He grabbed a boy in each arm and walked away from the group.

Harry was thankful that the papers were still declaring Sirius a hero, the only known soul alive that had returned from beyond the veil. But whatever happened on the other side of the curtain he would not speak of. And after a few days Harry knew not to ask; Sirius would tell the story himself whenever the time was right.

The days that followed after the Quidditch match, things settled down as N.E.W.T. exams became all consuming. On the few occasions that Gabriella and Harry had time to spend with each other they would visit Hagrid, and walk the gardens behind his hut. Her brother

had returned home to Privet Drive and it had been difficult to keep her mind focused on her studies, but Soseh had insisted that she see the term through and Harry was the touchstone that made it possible. Occasionally, their paths behind Hagrid's hut would take them to more remote locations and they would catch glimpses of Centaurs skirting the Forbidden Forest.

"It's like they're watching you," Gabriella would whisper, and while Harry said the idea was absurd, he couldn't help but think she might be right. Even Hagrid had noticed that something was stirring in the forest, and he wondered what it was.

On the eve of the new moon, after having administered his N.E.W.T. exam in Divination, Firenze announced he was returning to the forest. It was a shock to Pavarti and Lavender who wept bitterly about it all through dinner. After the meal, Firenze asked that only Professor Dumbledore and Harry see him off. Together the three walked to the edge of the forest, stopped, and as darkness fell watched the stars grow brighter and brighter. They stood quietly for some time. So long in fact that Harry was starting to get a bit restless; he had his transfiguration exam tomorrow. Nonetheless, seeing Dumbledore's patience, he waited for the Centaur to say goodbye. At about the point where Harry was seriously considering saying he had to use the toilet, Firenze raised his hand toward the eastern part of the sky.

"Can you see it?" he asked with a deep resonating tone. Both Harry and Dumbledore turned to look where his finger was pointed just above the trees. Dumbledore shook his head.

"I'm afraid, Firenze, that my eyes are not what they used to be."

"Ebyrth returns," said the Centaur flatly.

Harry's heart skipped; he'd heard those words before, when he was being taken to the falls.

"Are you sure?" asked Dumbledore with a hint of surprise, but then reeled back his own words. "Of course you are." The wizard let out a deep sigh. "I thought as much." Firenze's hoof clawed the ground.

"I have been asked to return," said Firenze. "Preparations need to be made." The words were sad and foreboding. "We are far too few." He looked down at Harry and what might be considered a smile came across the Centaur's face. "We will meet again, Harry Potter." The Centaur bowed his head and Harry returned the gesture.

"If ever I can help, I will," said Harry solemnly, not really sure why Firenze was being so glum.

"I know," said Firenze with a gaze that held much more meaning than the two words, and then he turned and disappeared into the forest.

Harry started to ask Dumbledore what had just happened, but the Headmaster silenced him with a finger to his lips, and beckoned him to follow. The two did not say another word until they climbed the circular staircase and entered Dumbledore's office. It was the first time they had been alone since the battle at the Ministry.

In the days after the attack, no one had seen Professor Dumbledore and many questioned why he hadn't been at the Ministry once it was discovered that Voldemort was there. Nor had he come to assist the Ministry battling at the Burrow. He was first seen on the day of the Quidditch match and appeared to grimace some when he lifted the Quidditch Cup to the victors. Still, even Mr. Weasley was a bit cool toward him during the great feast on Saturday. The prophet challenged that he had turned the coward in his advanced age, but Harry assured all that he was playing a vital role elsewhere, secret and hidden. No one dared challenge the story to his face, although he wondered as well where Dumbledore had been. Now the wizened wizard sat behind his desk as inscrutable as ever. It was Harry who began.

"Ebyrth?" he asked.

"A comet, Harry," answered Professor Dumbledore, "nothing more, nothing less."

"Then why..."

“Because the Centaurs believe it to be an omen, and I must say I can understand why.” Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and folded his hands together. “This particular comet is... unusual. Most such celestial bodies are quite periodic by nature; Halley’s Comet for example returns to visit the sun every 76 years or so. Ebyrth obeys no such pattern. Since before the time of Merlin when Centaurs roamed freely over all Europe, Ebyrth has returned six times. Six hundred years marked the largest span of peace, three the shortest. It has now been nearly a hundred years.”

“Peace?” asked Harry.

“You may have noticed that Centaurs are not what one might call... emotional.”

“No, sir, they’re not,” said Harry, stopping short from adding that they were pure boring when they weren’t shooting arrows at you.

“It is a skill they have developed for times of war, war with their arch enemies, war that always takes place upon the return of Ebyrth, war against the Dementors.” Dumbledore rose from his desk and showed a portrait of a Centaur locked in battle with a dark hooded figure. “It has been an ageless battle, marked by periods of peace when one side or the other is given to helping the quests of others.”

“The war is over,” declared Harry. “We won!”

“Won the war, Harry?” asked Dumbledore. “The battle, perhaps.”

“But Voldemort... I saw him; I felt him. He’s gone, I know it!”

“I believe you learned first hand that Tom Riddle did not hold supreme reign over darkness, Harry. Anaxarete was proof enough of that.” Dumbledore left his chair and walked over to look at the portraits of the previous headmasters of Hogwarts. Nearly all feigned sleep. “And you know that the Dark Lord has taken many precautions to avoid death.”

“He’s dead!” said Harry, but the determination of his words was waning. Dumbledore walked over to a candelabrum that was burning

four candles and, save for the four flickering flames, quenched all other light in his office.

“Can you not see it, Harry? The darkness is all around us, forever present, ever ready to seep in where light does not beat it back. He extinguished one of the candles and the light of the room dimmed. “All it takes is fear,” he extinguished another candle, “and enmity,” another, “and hate,” the room fell dark, “and the world becomes a very bleak and cold place once again. You, Harry, you brought us back from the brink. You brought unity here at Hogwarts.” A single candle glowed. “You brought unity between house elves and wizards, wizards and giants.” The second candle glowed. “You fought for those you loved,” the third candle glowed, “and forgave those who you would otherwise hate.” All the candles in Dumbledore’s office lit bright and for a moment Harry had to shield his eyes. “But, Harry, the darkness is always there, waiting for its next opportunity, and I’m afraid the return of Ebyrth marks more than the day Centaurs and Dementors return to battle.”

“The smoke,” Harry whispered. “Grigor used to play magic tricks for Gabriella and Antreas when they were younger. He would disappear in a cloud of smoke.” Harry replayed the scene of Voldemort’s death in his mind. “But he washed away, Professor. He’s gone; what I saw was no parlor trick.”

“Perhaps, Harry... perhaps,” answered Dumbledore choosing carefully not to commit. “But the Dementors have certainly left the side of Wizards and, with Ebyrth’s return, will no doubt rekindle old hatreds.” The professor climbed three steps up to view the telescope in his office. “Other than the fact that the comet passes through some time window in space, I doubt that it holds any true power or significance.” He sighed. “Dementors and Centaurs will battle because they now believe they must. There are so few Centaurs that Firenze was called to join the herd.”

“But what does that have to do with me?” asked Harry.

“I was hoping,” said Dumbledore, looking down at Harry from his perch, “that you would tell me.” For a moment Harry blinked, looking up at the wizard who was smiling knowingly down on him. There was

something immutable about his features; the flecked grayness in his beard, the shape of his smile, and the look in his eyes were ominously familiar.

"Well?" Dumbledore asked again, breaking Harry's gaze. Finally, Harry told him of the falls of Hogwarts and how he first came to find them.

"So you were their sacrifice," said Dumbledore, climbing down from the telescope. "By Centaur tradition, Ebyrth demands one when first seen. Most do not survive the test unless guided by another hand. There was no one else with you? They simply tossed you in?" He asked these words as if he didn't believe the original story.

"Butt naked," answered Harry. A smile crossed Dumbledore's eyes.

"If not, your clothes would have washed away. Now you know why Centaurs believe that such things as robes are unclean." Dumbledore repositioned himself in his chair while Harry looked at the instruments in his office. "I have no idea what the year will bring, Harry, but now is not the time to let down your guard." Harry looked closely at one instrument in particular, the one that Dumbledore had used to watch the various points of light, members of the Order, Harry thought. Unable to sleuth its operation, he turned to look back at the headmaster and sighed.

"So I'll be going back to Privet Drive then, sir?"

"Until your birthday, Harry," answered Dumbledore. "It would be wisest. Then, I understand you have a small voyage planned."

Harry's eyes widened. He'd almost forgotten his Christmas present to Gabriella. And the thought that Dumbledore was giving him permission...

"You don't mind, sir?"

"Harry, I am honored that you so value my counsel, but you will be of age and the time has come for you to make your own choices. I have given my advice, be on your guard. Should you choose, after your

birthday, to leave the Dursleys and live with Sirius he may have other requirements.”

By the time Harry made it back to the Gryffindor common room, his face hurt from being pulled back in such a grand smile. They hadn't really talked about it, but he was sure Sirius would be happy to invite him in to Grimmauld Place, especially while Harry was training to be an Auror. Suddenly, the thought made the Gryffindor pause outside the portrait of the Fat Lady.

“Password?” she asked, but Harry walked over against the wall and looked down at the drips of black that still stained the floor.

For the first time since he could remember he questioned if being an Auror was his calling. The Darbinyan women had led him to his true gift -- healing. He stood there flicking his wand at the carpet with no success as he wondered what it might be like if he and Gabriella set up their own Healers practice, maybe with Ron and Hermione. A great burden pressed down on him as he pondered his role in yet a new war; he didn't feel much like fighting any more.

When he finally entered the common room, he found Lavender and Pavarti had only slightly recovered from their glum moods and he didn't have the heart to tell them that Firenze had just been conscripted to fight a new war. He would wait to tell of the return of Ebyrth and of the dark tidings it carried in its brightening glow.

The next day, after their Transfiguration N.E.W.T., Ron was distraught. Professor McGonagall had said that students unable to complete the transfiguration of a pillow into a goose and back again would have to withdraw from the class. Ron transfigured the pillow into a goose without trouble, and thought he had properly reversed the spell. Professor McGonagall was giving him high praise when the pillow waddled off the desk and fell to the floor, two webbed feet protruding from the bottom. After the exam, Ron and Hermione joined Harry and Gabriella down by the lake. Everyone's shoes were off as they enjoyed a beautiful blue sky and poked their toes into the lake's wet sandy bank.

"I'm sure she'll pass you," consoled Hermione holding Ron's hand in her own. "It's an easy mistake."

"It wasn't a mistake," Ron spat. "I was distracted!"

"I understand, sweetie," she said kissing his cheek, but she didn't seem to believe him and that made Ron angrier.

"NO you DON'T understand!" he yelled, pulling away from Hermione. There was something roiling on his insides and nobody could sense what it was.

"Ron," asked Harry with concern, "what's up?"

"Parkinson," Ron hissed through his teeth. "Park-in-son..." but he didn't finish.

"You swore not to," said Gabriella as if hearing something no one else could. There was a pause and then she said, "This summer?"

"Okay you two," interrupted Hermione, "we've talked about this before. If you're going to have a conversation..."

"Sorry," said Gabriella, "I forget he's not moving his lips."

Ron had taken to refining his skill in Legilimens, but had sworn to only use his gift on the willing. While the other three could always open their minds to tell him things, he had trouble speaking back his own thoughts. It was easiest with Gabriella, but she always spoke her thoughts so others could hear; Ron did not. Nor, at this moment, did he seem inclined to.

"I saw her," Ron said to Gabriella. "During my exam, she was thinking about it." He was clearly agitated, and was getting worse by the minute.

"Harry mentioned it," answered Gabriella. "He wrote about your arguments in his letters."

“Are you talking about Dean?” asked Hermione, but Ron wouldn’t say. He looked like a pressure cooker ready to explode.

“We can find out, if you wish,” said Gabriella, “tonight in the common room. I will talk to her and focus her thoughts; you can read beyond her words.”

“Ron,” chided Hermione, “you said you weren’t going to...”

“This is different!” Ron shot back. “If I’m right...” He held out his wand in front of him and, pointing it upward, started spinning it in a small circle. A cloud formed turning into a tiny tornado that fluttered across the lake sucking fish up and tossing them into the air as it traveled along. It was a level of magic rarely seen from Ron Weasley, and it made Hermione a bit uneasy. Harry noted the concern in Hermione’s eyes.

“Ron,” he said, “I think you made an oath.” Ron remembered their visit to the falls, and glared back at Harry.

“An oath?” asked Hermione. Harry was surprised that they had not yet spoken of it.

“Yeah,” said Ron ignoring Hermione and answering Harry, “I agreed. But... if I’m right... if I’m right, I’m going to kill...”

“Well, look who we have here!” sneered a voice from behind them. “I would have thought that members of my own house could discern the proper associates. But then you’re both tainted I suppose.”

It was Professor Snape; he was striding toward them by the lake with a large empty glass jar in his arms. With the sky blue and the sun warm, he would usually still be wearing his thick black robes, but today he was not. It was the first time Harry had ever seen the professor in black pants and a white shirt. More amazing still was the fact that the sleeves on his white shirt were rolled up. As he stepped closer and passed the four to wade out into the lake up to his knees, Harry also noticed that his hair was clean; he actually looked presentable.

For a moment, Snape stared down at the water with the large jar under his left arm. He reached for his wand, but then slipped it back. Harry watched in amazement as a small smile creased Snape's lips and it had nothing to do with being vindictive, or spiteful, or inflicting some cruel punishment. Instead, it was as if he was recalling some small enjoyable memory from his childhood. Whatever it was he was about to do, he was enjoying himself. Snape scanned through the ripples of the water, then plunged his hand below its surface and pulled up a grindylow. "Always at dusk," he whispered with a grin. Then he filled the jar with water, stuffed the grindylow inside and screwed on the lid. A tremendous look of satisfaction crossed his face as he turned to head back to the castle. Just as he left the water, Harry stopped him.

"Excuse me professor," he beckoned. Snape turned back and looked at him with as smug an expression as he could muster.

"Yes, Potter?" Harry withdrew his wand and snapped it at Snape.

"Asciutto!" he called, and Snape's pants immediately dried. Snape looked down and found them perfectly creased. "I never got the chance to properly thank you for being there for Hermione at the Ministry, and for keeping Tonks out of trouble."

"Yes, sir," added Hermione. "It was quiet brave."

"Thank you," Snape answered, not really sure what to do next. As Snape paused, Harry noticed that the Dark Mark on the Death Eater's arm had disappeared; he wondered for how long, and hoped forever. Harry looked at his own pale white mark, a collection of designs representing the four houses and a uniting mark to destroy ignorance, and for the first time he was truly glad to see the scar there. Looking out across the grass and down the shore of the lake, students from all four houses were mixing and enjoying the sinking sun. Gabriella broke his trance.

"Professor, has there been no word from Draco?" she asked with sincere concern in her voice. Unease spread across Snape's face and he appeared to think about his answer for some time.

"I'm afraid not, Gabriella," he answered. "But not to worry; if he's alive I'll find him. I know where his heart lies, and it is here at Hogwarts." He gave Harry the briefest of looks, and then turned to Ron. "Mr. Weasley, have you taken care of your sock problem?" he asked. Ron's ears reddened.

"Y-Yes, professor," he answered, looking quickly to Snape but then down to the ground not holding anyone else's glance.

"Very good," said Professor Snape and then he looked at Gabriella and pointed at the jar. "For your N.E.W.T.," he whispered as if no one else could hear. "Enjoy the evening." And he walked briskly back to the castle.

"That was weird," said Harry. "Did you see his hair?"

"I don't know," said Gabriella. "He's always been quite kind to me considering I broke his arm."

"What's a grindylow got to do with your potions N.E.W.T.?" asked Ron.

"What sock problem?" asked Hermione, but Ron had already put on his shoes and was dusting the sand from his pants.

"Ready for dinner?" he asked, fiercely trying to change the subject.

Nobody bothered to ask more, knowing they'd get no reply, and they all returned to the castle.

The rest of N.E.W.T.s week was uneventful. Harry's last exam was in Potions and it appeared that everyone was more than prepared to mix the ingredients required for the anti-venom of a grindylow bite. Apparently, Gabriella and her friends at the lake were not the only ones given the same hint. Snape was exceptionally pleased with himself that everyone was doing so well, although Harry and the others were none too keen about having a grindylow bite their arms. When Snape finally dismissed the class, he wished them all a fine summer.

That night the Gryffindor common room was in full celebration. Harry had wanted to meet with Gabriella after dinner, but she said she had plans and that she'd come to get him later in the evening. Similarly, Hermione found herself alone after dinner. When Gabriella appeared at the portrait of the Fat Lady with beads of sweat rolling off her brow, both Gryffindors were concerned. Without asking permission she burst into the common room.

"Hey you can't..." started Neville, but Gabriella pushed him aside. She strode up to Harry with a look of fear in her eyes. Hermione walked over to the pair.

"What is it?" asked Harry. "What's wrong?"

Gabriella looked at Harry and then to Hermione.

"Is there somewhere we can talk?" she asked Harry.

"You can speak in front of Hermione," he said. Gabriella was torn, but decided it better to get Harry's help right away.

"It's Ron," she began slowly. "He's... angry." She stopped, and looked nervously at Hermione once again. "We found out what Pansy was hiding." Hermione looked a bit irritated that Ron had read Pansy's mind. Gabriella continued, "He said he was going to kill her, and I think...."

"I know he has a grudge, but he's not going to kill anyone," said Harry dismissively. "Why, what did she do?"

"Last summer in Germany ... she held three men under the Imperius Curse... the same three that attacked Hermione."

Chapter 72 - The Razor's Edge

o-o-o-o-o

"NO!" gasped Hermione, holding her hand over her mouth as her eyes grew wide. The outburst turned quite a few heads in the Gryffindor common room, but did not have much impact on the end of term celebration. The crowd was already loud and didn't pay Hermione too much attention. Her hand began to tremble as it covered her lips, her emotions swinging somewhere between fear and anger.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked Gabriella, but then like Dumbledore had told Firenze the week before he added, "Of course you are." Harry, Hermione and Gabriella started out the portrait of the Fat Lady when Ginny asked what was wrong. When they told her she insisted on coming along.

By the time they made it to the staircases, Hermione's emotions were past the initial shock and her thoughts continued to split between concern over what Ron might do to Pansy Parkinson and her now growing hatred of the Slytherin.

"I wonder if Nott had anything to do with it," she whispered as they waited for the staircase to slide into position. Her teeth began to grind together.

"I doubt it," said Ginny. "They didn't get together until Christmas."

"I'd like to know where he spent his summer vacation," steamed Hermione. Harry watched as the anger began to grow in his friend.

What is it, he wondered, that lies in the hearts of wizards and witches that distinguishes good from bad, the redeemable from the condemned? Gabriella had always told Harry he had a sensitive heart. Was he born with it? Everyone who knew of Harry's life with the Dursleys was amazed that he didn't turn out bitter and spiteful.

"He was probably there with her," Hermione muttered as they turned down another flight of stairs.

Draco, born of wealth and privilege, played by a different set of rules, rules that Harry could never come to terms with. And yet, in the end, Draco risked his own life to save those of Harry and his friends. Harry contemplated which Draco Malfoy would appear if the two should chance to meet again. His heart told him that the meeting would take place, but his mind was unsure if that reunion would be a good one.

"They're both evil is what they are," said Hermione more firmly as the stairs locked into place with a loud crunch and the four hopped off. "Pure evil."

Ron had grown up poor but had a loving and supportive family. Unfortunately, this year Harry had seen shades to his personality he never knew existed. Yes, it was Pansy that held three men under her Imperius Curse. They attacked Hermione, and two of them were black. But it was Ron who allowed his thoughts and judgments to become clouded by that one event, however traumatic, and he used it to apply indictments against all people of colour, even his own friend Dean Thomas. If Ron had been black would he have used the same logic to conclude that since one of the attackers was white the whole race should be condemned?

"They would have stood in the shadows and watched us die!" said Hermione through gritted teeth as they reached the bottom floor, passed the celebration in the Great Hall, and headed toward the dungeons. Harry looked up at the grand castle entrance as they briskly walked by.

Six years had past since Harry, Hermione and Ron had walked through the front doors of Hogwarts. Back then he had no good reason to despise all of Slytherin, but in all their years at Hogwarts the three of them had been spiteful against everyone that wore green robes. Greg Goyle had changed all that, and Ron, having spent the last term in Slytherin, was now the first to admit that they weren't all the same, and in fact the ones he'd grown to know were down right decent. He'd gone so far as to invite Blaise to the Burrow over the summer; now, all that was about to unravel. Ron was about to cross the precipice into darkness.

"Maybe Ron's right," said Hermione with narrowed eyes. They turned to enter the staircase down to the dungeons. "Maybe they both should..." she slipped and had to grab Harry's arm to keep from falling. The light was dim, but when they looked down, clearly visible was a pool of what looked like blood. "He did it," whispered Hermione just as Ginny gasped; there was an odor of decay. Hermione pulled her wand for more light just as a voice startled everyone from behind.

"What did you do to her!" Nott screamed, running fast and furious from the direction of the Great Hall. "Where's Weasels!"

"Nott, wait," called Harry, but Nott would not wait. His eyes were on fire, his mind furious, and he drew his wand.

"Écraser!" cried Hermione, a ring of fury in her own voice reverberated off the small stone stairway. A tremendous blast of fiery orange light erupted from her wand and the spell literally lifted Nott up off the floor, flung him against the wall, and began to crush him into the stone.

"You'll never..." Hermione began, pulling him slightly away from the wall and slamming him back into the stone. There was a series of sickening snaps as more than one bone broke. Harry was reminded of the effect his Patronus had on the Dementors outside the Gryffindor common room.

"...hurt anyone..." Hermione pulled back and slammed him once again as another bone cracked and then another. Blood began to seep from his lips.

"...again!" Once more, she pulled Nott back to slam him against the wall, but Harry grabbed her arm.

"Stop Hermione!" cried out Ginny, and Gabriella grabbed Hermione's wand. Together, the three broke Hermione's spell. Unconscious, Nott collapsed to the floor, and it took Hermione a moment to realize what she had done. Nott's arms and legs turned in a variety of unnatural ways.

"Oh no," she whispered running to Nott's side.

“Harry,” said Gabriella urgently, “find Ron; maybe there’s still time. I’ll take care of Ted.” She too ran over to the side of Nott’s lifeless body, returned Hermione’s wand and the two began to heal the broken bones in Nott’s twisted limp form, at least enough to get him upstairs to the hospital without further injury.

For a moment Harry hesitated, but when Ginny lit her wand and he saw the bloody footsteps leading down and around the corner, his decision was made. The two ran headlong into the dungeons. They were nearly to the Slytherin common room when they saw Ron; the scene was gruesome. His hair and robes were drenched, dripping to the floor. His hands were down at his sides, held slightly away from his body, and he was walking as if he couldn’t bear to have his soaked robes touch his skin. Worse, he was angrily talking to himself.

“Gutted like a fish! I’ll gut him next!” they heard him mutter as he approached the common room door. He was still trembling with rage, and they called his name from down the hall.

“Ron!”

He stopped, and slowly turned his whole body around to see who it was. Dark streaks ran down his hair and into his face. He couldn’t see well and, still trembling, blindly held up his wand.

“Who’s there?” he called. “Harry? Ginny?”

Ginny ran to him first, but stopped short only a few feet away.

“That smell,” she gasped, “it’s you! You smell of death! Oh Ron, why?”

Harry caught up, and gasped as well. The stench was awful.

“You didn’t gut...”

“I will! OR I would!” snapped Ron. “If I could get my hands around him!”

“Poor Pansy! The smell of death!” Ginny began to cry.

“Him? Him who?” asked Harry.

“Peeves!” yelled Ron exasperated. “He dumped last week’s fish guts on me the bloody prat.” Still shaking from the cold, Ron slipped his wand away and tried to wipe the muck from his face. “Tell me how you stuck him in that mirror again Harry; I want to have a go!”

“What?” asked Ginny, surprised. “Where’s Pansy?”

“Ah... so, Gabriella told you?”

“What did you do to her!” yelled Ginny.

Ron’s eyes narrowed into gleeful evil slits as the gook dribbled down his face. A cruel smile creased his lips.

“I dealt with her like no one else would, like no one else could. Brilliant, really. I told her that her precious Teddy was in the anti-chamber off the Great Hall. I had to get her alone.” His eyes grew distant for a minute. “She’s probably still in there if nobody’s found her.”

“Ron,” said Harry slowly. “Is she okay?”

“Let me get this crap off me and...”

Both Harry and Ginny raised their wands and in a flash of light they scourgified Ron and his robes so that they sparkled.

“Oh, yeah,” Ron said sheepishly for forgetting the spell.

“Come on,” said Harry. “Show us.”

“Maybe it’s not too late,” added Ginny.

“Oh, if someone’s found her... it’s too late.” Ron smiled. “We can only hope.”

“Nott found her,” said Harry as they rounded back up the stairs. “He came to attack you, but Hermione...” They stopped at the wall where the Slytherin had been crushed. Nott, Hermione and Gabriella were gone, but there on the floor was a real pool of blood.

“A girl from Beauxbatons taught her that spell,” said Ginny. “I saw them practicing together, crushing apples to make homemade applesauce.”

“She made applesauce out of Nott?” said Ron excitedly. “Bloody, brilliant!” Ginny shot him a scathing glare.

They ran passed the castle entrance and were about halfway to the Great Hall when they heard an uproar of laughter followed by a deep scolding voice. When they came to the entrance they found Pansy in the middle of the hall looking quite well. She was seated with a group of Slytherin and next to her, in black robes, stood Professor Snape. He was one of three professors overseeing the celebrations of the mostly younger students in the Great Hall. The first and second years has something of a dance going. Part of the floor had been cleared away in the corner where a group of five students was playing music and singing. The singing stopped when Professor Snape raised his voice again.

“Ms. Parkinson,” said Snap sharply. “You will watch your mouth!”

“Yes, sir,” Pansy replied. Her expression was a mixture of fury, fear and frustration.

“Very good,” said Snape, seemingly relieved. “You said you were hexed, or cursed, or something. Who did it?”

“I think you’re an arse! I know I am,” Pansy blurted. She tried to cover her mouth, but the words flowed out clearly. “I used the Imperius Curse this summer.”

Snickers, gasps, and laughter fluttered through the Great Hall. Agitated, Professor Flitwick walked over.

“Severus,” squeaked the professor, “I would think your students would have better control of their mouths.” He stood next to Pansy and patted her hand. “There, there, girl,” he said kindly. “Everything is going to be just fine.”

“Thank you, professor,” Pansy answered weakly. “I’m really not myself. I think I should go to bed.”

“Yes, my dear,” said Professor Flitwick, “what seems to be the matter?”

“I think you’re an arse! I know I am,” Pansy blurted again. This time she tried to squeeze her head but still her words reverberated about the hall. “I used the Imperius Curse this summer.”

“Oh my goodness,” shot Professor Flitwick. “Severus, do you know anything about this?”

“I’m afraid not,” replied Snape. “Something’s at work here, but I can’t tell what it is. I’ll take her to the hospital wing and we can learn more. Ms. Parkinson, will you join me?”

“I think you’re an arse! I know I am.” She buried her head in her robes and let out a muffled, “I used the Imperius Curse this summer.” The whole room was astonished at the brazen words.

Snape escorted Pansy out past Harry, Hermione and Ron who were still standing at the entrance to the Great Hall. When she saw Ron her eyes flamed in fury and she raised her hand pointing her finger at him.

“Professor Snape!” Pansy cried, but Ron cut in.

“What’s the matter Pansy?” he asked with a false look of concern.

“I think you’re an arse! I know I am.” Exasperated, Professor Snape pulled his wand and used a silencing charm. Pansy silently mouthed, “I used the Imperius Curse this summer!” She kept pointing at Ron, trying to say something but, silenced, simply clenched her hands in tight balls at her side and continued up the stairs to the hospital ward.

“What’s wrong with her?” asked Ginny.

“You should ask her!” Ron said with a laugh. “I planted a suggestion in her mind. Every time she hears a question, she responds with the same phrase. I was hoping she’d stay asleep until breakfast tomorrow, but I guess Nott found her.” Ginny looked confused. “Sometimes, Ginny, there are other ways than vengeance to show someone the error of their ways. Sometimes, a little cunning is all it takes.”

“Salazar would have been proud,” said Harry. “Pretty soon, Ron, you’ll be speaking in parseltongue.” Ron hissed and smiled.

“Look,” Harry continued, “we’d better follow them to the hospital wing. Nott looked pretty bad, and I don’t know what Hermione would do if... well, let’s go.”

The three made sure that Parkinson and Snape had a good head start before they too made their way up to the hospital wing.

“So,” asked Ron, “what did she really do? He’s really not applesauce, is he?” His voice was eager with anticipation, but when they finished telling him the story he was a bit shaken. “I remember when she punched Malfoy. I never figured she’d crush the life out of someone.”

“Well, that’s what Gabriella thought you were going to do to Pansy,” said Ginny. “She said you were going to kill her.” It took Ron a few minutes to answer this, and Harry wasn’t sure what he’d say. His mind had flashed back to the time Harry and Dean had carried Draco up these same stairs after the Dementors attacked Hogsmeade; it seemed like a lifetime ago.

“Well,” said Ron, “I couldn’t could I? I mean, I wanted to hurt her the same way she hurt Hermione, but...” he stopped near the top of the stairs and took a long breath. “It’s not about the oath, it’s... well that would make me like her, wouldn’t it?” He turned and started up the stairs in his green robes. “Not all Slytherins are evil gits.”

They came up to the entrance to the hospital wing just as Hermione and Gabriella exited. Hermione was pale and was leaning on Gabriella for support; it was clear she had been crying. When she saw Ron, she ran into his arms, held him tight, and broke down into tears again.

"It's okay," he offered, but the words only made Hermione cry harder as she shook her head. Gabriella walked over to Harry and slid her arm around him. There was a sadness about her and he kissed her cheek.

"Pansy looked fine," she said. "What was the blood?"

"Peeves dumped last week's fish guts on him," answered Harry quietly. "He was headed to the dungeons to clean up. All Ron did to Pansy was plant some sort of mental suggestion."

"Is Nott going to be alright?" Ginny whispered as she stepped over to Harry and Gabriella, but Gabriella's face was grim.

"They've called for his aunt," Gabriella whispered back.

"I know his dad died at the Burrow," said Ginny, "but surely his mother..."

"She killed herself last night," cut in Gabriella. Ginny sucked in a short burst of air in a high pitch.

"He never said," she whispered. "No wonder he's been so... so..."

"How is he?" asked Harry again. Gabriella's face darkened and she hung her head, shaking it.

"Ron, they've taken my wand," Hermione said loudly still weeping. "He's going to die."

Suddenly, Gabriella's whole posture changed. She went rigid and gripped Harry's arm tightly. She raised her face and when her black eyes met his, there was a distinct twinkle.

“Don’t be silly,” she said brightly. Everyone turned thinking her words cold and heartless. Harry didn’t need to be asked; he didn’t need to be told. There wasn’t much time, so he kissed Gabriella briskly on the lips and ran as fast as he could.

“You’re brilliant!” he yelled over his shoulder running toward the stairs. “Have I ever told you?”

He passed student after student, each asking if he knew what had happened to Parkinson and Nott, but he ignored them all. Climbing the staircases two at a time, he passed Dean who was frantically looking for Ginny. Harry barely got off “hospital” in one gasp as he jumped to the next staircase. Dean tore off like a rocket.

When Harry burst into the Gryffindor common room, it was still in full celebration. Everyone was oblivious to the drama unfolding, and when he exploded into the boys’ dormitory he completely ignored the fact there were Hufflepuff robes lying on the floor outside Neville’s curtain covered bed.

He ran to his trunk and pulled out the Heart of Asha, levitated it into the air, and blasted it with fire. Ignoring the shriek behind him, he cut his hand and let the blood fall freely onto the glowing cinnabar... and then he took hold.

x-00-x

The full moon was barely visible, sandwiched between the horizon and the dull gray layer of clouds that reached out in every direction. Finally, as everyone packed their bags for the return home, it dipped from view. Rain had threatened nearly everyday over the last week, but not a drop had fallen. The grass surrounding the castle, which was usually so lush, had a slight golden tint to it. Harry closed the window in the boys’ dormitory and finished tying the laces on his trainers. Peter Walreux was exchanging addresses with Neville, Dean was helping Seamus take his things down the stairs to the waiting carriages, and Theodore Nott sat on his own bed glaring at Harry to hurry up.

Harry, thoroughly accustomed to the fuming glare by now, climbed up on his bed and carefully removed the portrait of him and Gabriella. The painting's sunset was as brilliant as ever, and the two smiled brightly into each other's eyes. For a moment he considered how the portrait might look in Grimmauld Place after his seventeenth birthday. Smiling warmly, he carefully set it in his trunk, shut the lid and sealed the lock with his wand. With some effort he started maneuvering it toward the stairs.

"If you think I'm going to help you with that, Potter," said Nott with a sneer, "you're dead wrong."

"Really, Ted," said Harry lightly, "you're going to have to stop saying the 'D' word. It's become a bit tiring."

"Yeah?" said Nott. "Well... well you'll be tired too... when you're dead!"

Harry just rolled his eyes to the ceiling, levitated his trunk with his wand, and made his way down the staircase. To the vexation of both students, Professor Dumbledore decided that Theodore Nott move in to Gryffindor with Harry and his mates... something about powerful magic that neither of them understood when the Headmaster explained it to them in his office a week ago, and something they didn't care to try to understand after Harry and Seamus first shoved another bed into the corner of their dormitory.

"Bloody insane," muttered Seamus, as Nott stood with arms crossed and scowled, refusing to lift a finger.

Harry figured it was safer for Ron, since Nott might have rallied support for some sort of revenge. If he tried anything in Gryffindor, he would be pounced on instantly. As it was, aside from the Slytherin's constant complaints and incessant threats, nothing had happened. The final uneventful week at Hogwarts had been spent planning career decisions and next year's courses.

There was, perhaps, a second reason behind Dumbledore's madness to place Nott in Gryffindor for the final week of the year. It forced Hermione to see the person she nearly killed at every meal for seven

days straight. Harry, however, was tired of her constantly asking how Nott was, and this final morning of the school year was no different as the two descended the staircase. They were again running late; nearly everyone had left, and she sat alone by the fire, Crookshanks circling her legs. In her hands, she was playing with some sort of small floating black object and, when she saw them descend, she quickly slipped it back into her robes.

“Good morning Ted,” she called with a smile. “How are you feel-...”

“I’m fine, Granger,” he snapped back. “The sooner I’m done with this stink-pit the better!”

“I don’t know, Ted,” said Harry dryly. “I heard Dumbledore tell Snape that he thought you should spend all next year here.”

“He wouldn’t!” cried Nott in a panic.

“No... no he wouldn’t,” said a stiff, proper voice from around the corner; it was Professor McGonagall. “Although, if I hear my house referred to in that manner again, I might consider recommending it. Come with me, Mr. Nott; I’ll escort you down to see the Headmaster. We need to discuss your request to meet with Ms. Parkinson while she is being held at the Ministry for questioning; Professor Dumbledore has a few questions of his own for you.” They started out the portrait of the Fat Lady. “I’m afraid your visit won’t be possible.”

“Why not?” barked Nott. “She hasn’t done...” and the portrait shut closed leaving Harry and Hermione alone in the common room.

Harry stood near the portrait, his trunk still floating in the air. There were no other living souls in Gryffindor House, but Hermione still stared blankly at the flickering flames. Crookshanks looked up at her and gave a soft meow.

“I guess we’re last,” said Harry quietly, but Hermione continued to hold her eyes fixed, her bushy hair hiding her face from Harry’s view. He knew she was upset; she’d been holding it in all week and he decided to search for something positive to say.

"I bet when we walk through these doors next year, you'll be Head Girl."

It was the straw that broke the camel's back. Hermione dropped her face into her hands and a torrent of emotion poured forth. Harry set his trunk down and was at her side in an instant. Crying deep heaving sobs, Hermione cringed away when he offered comfort.

"Don't!" she whimpered. "I don't deserve it."

"What do you mean?" he asked, but she continued to cry. Finally, she stopped but still wouldn't look into his eyes.

"I ruined everything," said Hermione. "I was a beast to you. I was a beast to Tonks. I don't know how Ron can stand the sight of me!" She was trying hard not to sob any more, and even though she pushed him once again, Harry put his arm about her shoulder. She looked at him and said, "I'm going home to mum and dad, and they're going to ask how the year was... and they're going to... going to... ask..." Again Hermione broke down crying.

"Haven't you told them about Nott?"

"N-N-Noooo," cried Hermione. "How... how can I t-tell them I k-kill-... ohhh...."

"You didn't kill anybody," Harry said emphatically.

"D-don't you remember what Tonks said?" Hermione said, more strongly this time. She was beginning to get mad at herself. "When we find we must turn to evil to fight evil, we will have lost the war." She turned and held Harry's hand, tears still dripping off her cheeks.

"Harry, you defeated Voldemort and... and all I've done is resurrected his spirit, his hate." Harry sighed, shaking his head, lifted her up off the couch and gave her a hug. Then he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Hermione, there is so much love inside of you, all the hate got smashed out years ago. There's none left! Merlin, you care so much

about... well everyone and everything. You just lost your temper, that's all."

Hermione looked up at him wishing it was true, hoping it was true, and then believing it was true. She gave a small smile and hugged Harry again.

"Come on," he said. "They'll leave without us if we don't hurry, and if that happens I know someone else who will lose her temper and it won't be pretty."

Together they walked hurriedly down the staircases, levitating their trunks in front of them; Crookshanks padded behind. The castle was deserted. Harry figured everyone was outside, loaded into the carriages and ready to go; he and Hermione only had a few more minutes, if that. They were nearly to the front doors when a familiar voice sneered from behind. It was Theodore Nott. Evidently, he'd finished his interview with Professor Dumbledore and had been waiting patiently for them to come down, hiding behind a large plant.

"I'm SO glad you've chosen to come alone," he taunted. His wand was drawn, while both Harry and Hermione's were occupied with their trunks. "Just a little payback," he growled. "You owe me... you both owe me!" But before another word left his mouth, the corridor flashed white and Nott yelped.

The sound was somewhere between pain and the bark of a dog, and the tone of his voice surprised even Nott. He went to say something and another yelp sputtered forth, this time distinctly doglike. Before you could say, "Here Skippy!" a tale pushed itself out of his robes and long whiskers began to sprout from his nose. Nott flicked his wand to cast a spell, and this time his voice erupted in a bark -- nothing happened. Clearly, he was turning into a poorly pedigreed canine of some sort.

"Er, Ted," said Harry calmly, "you'd better see Madame Pomfrey before you get fleas and she won't let you in." A look of horror spread across Nott's furry face. Crookshanks hissed at him and he ran upstairs as fast as he could. Harry and Hermione simply laughed. Harry looked around to see who cast the spell.

"Gab? Ron?" he called. To his surprise a small blonde haired first year in Gryffindor robes stepped out from behind a suit of armor. It was Patrick O'Riley.

"Patrick!" said Harry in astonishment. "You did that?" Patrick looked very distraught.

"I saw him lurkin' 'bout after he left the Headmaster's office," said Patrick, sliding his wand away. "I knew what he was after, so I figured I'd wait an' see." Discouraged, Patrick looked down at the floor. "He was supposed teh turn inteh a dog straight away."

"Are you kidding?" said Hermione with a smile. "That was tremendous magic! Truly spectacular!" Hearing those words from his fellow Gryffindor, none other than Hermione Granger, Patrick's eyes lit up and a white smile spread across his young face.

"Well," said Pat, "Harry and I, we made a pact see. Teh look out fer each other's back an' all. Harry wipes out You-Know-Who an' well... the least I could do was teh return the favor. Right, Harry?" The Boy-Who-Lived was just beaming.

"That's right Patrick!" Together the three started out the castle doors. Harry had his arm about Patrick. "We orphans have to stick together."

"We all need to stick together," whispered Hermione. She pulled a small black ball from her pocket and considered it for a moment. Then she turned to the first year. "Here, Patrick," she said. "Do you think you can keep this safe until next year?"

Harry recognized it at once; it was the black Snitch that Terrence Tellman had given Cho when she joined Harry and Ron to watch them practice with the Magpies. He wasn't sure how it made its way into Hermione's hands, but figured it had been passed around a bit. Harry knew someone who would be very keen about the Magpies and he smiled seeing his friend in red hair wave madly at him to hurry up. Seated next to him was a beautiful black haired girl with similar irritation in her eyes.

“You better keep that safe, Patrick,” encouraged Harry. “It’s a Hogwarts treasure. The Magpies lost a couple players to Azkaban this year; there’ll never be another ball like that one you’re holding in your hand.”

“Brilliant!” Patrick beamed.

“In fact,” continued Harry, “the team will be hurting for new players. I bet this time next year I can get you at least one new signature on that Snitch.”

“You think?” said Patrick eagerly. “That’d be great!” He took the black orb and gently placed the precious object in his pocket. “Thanks, Hermione.” It was the happiest Hermione had felt all week.

As they walked along the row of waiting carriages, Patrick climbed into the one with James Chang and immediately showed him his newly acquired treasure. Harry smiled, hearing the two first years of off about Quidditch. He and Hermione joined Ron and Gabriella, and a moment later the Threstral driven carriages were on their way to the train in Hogsmeade.

“Like I said,” Harry whispered in Hermione’s ear. “You’ve got nothing but love.” Hermione smiled and leaned over to Harry.

“So,” she whispered quietly into Harry’s ear, “will you watch my back when I tell Ron I just handed the Magpie’s Snitch to Patrick?” Ron stiffened.

“YOU WHAT?”

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Author’s Note: One more chapter and an epilogue.

Chapter 73 - The Burden of Becoming

-X-X-X-X-

The cloudy skies and warm weather combined together and made an already weary Harry even more bleary eyed. The rhythmic click-clack, clackety-clak, click-clack, clackety-clak, rolled in and out of Harry's senses. Her body was warm, pressed firmly against his, and his head slid over against the wall of the newly remodeled Hogwarts Express. Just for a moment, he thought, and closed his eyes.

It was warm and the grass made his bare back itch. The sun was bright in his eyes, and as he pulled his hand up to shield his view, she grabbed him by the wrist. She sat on his hips and pushed both wrists against the soft earth blinding him in the sunlight. He could feel her long hair tickle his sides as she lowered her face to kiss his lips. When she grew close, she blocked the sun and Harry opened his eyes. Looking back into his were two twinkling black pools that bore mischief in their gleam.

She kissed him gently at first, and then pressed down more firmly letting go of his wrists and drawing her arms around his neck, pulling him close. Her warm breath blew across his left ear and nibbled around the caduceus that matched the one hanging from her own ear. Her perfume filled his senses and he reached up and held her tight. He could feel the rhythmic pounding of her heart next to his, racing with excitement, with anticipation. With a grand sweeping motion they rolled in the grass and Harry now looked down into her eyes. She was smiling, and he tried to imagine a more beautiful sight in the universe, but found nothing to compare.

He could feel her tremble slightly beneath him, as if the very earth were undulating, rocking rhythmically back and forth. But then the rumbling grew to a roar; the earth was shaking beneath them both, and Harry turned to see dozens of Centaurs pouring out of the nearby forest. As the Centaurs charged forth seemingly oblivious to the students presence, Gabriella screamed and Harry dropped to shield her as best he could expecting to be trampled at any minute. The ground shook violently and the roar grew more deafening when, suddenly, it stopped. A blue-jay cackled in the distance, its voice

echoing off the silence. Harry looked up, they were all around, to the side, in front and behind; Centaurs in every direction.

“Harry Potter,” said a voice directly overhead. Harry turned to see a Centaur with bright red hair looking directly at him. His eyes were sad, his voice familiar; it was Ronan.

“Yes?” asked Harry as he sat up, releasing Gabriella from his protective grasp. Next to Ronan stood Magorian the leader of the Centaurs.

“Filthy beasts,” hissed Gabriella quietly in Harry’s ear. He noticed Magorian narrow his eyes, but if the Centaur heard her words, he paid them no heed.

“Harry Potter,” said Magorian with a very slow methodical voice. “It is time.”

“Now?” sputtered Harry. “But I’m busy. I was just...”

“It is time,” said Ronan urgently.

“It’s time!” said another voice. “Harry, it’s time!”

Harry blinked his eyes, and realized the train had stopped. Everyone was pulling down their trunks and bidding farewell to their mates down the corridors. He blinked again and awkwardly began to stand up. Gabriella looked down at him and smiled.

“Were you dreaming of me?” she asked with a twinkle in her eyes that mirrored the expression that was just in Harry’s mind. He smiled back and stood at her side.

“You are all I ever dream of,” he said, and kissed her on the lips.

“Oh please,” groaned Ron, rolling his eyes. “Can you be any more corny!”

“Just because you couldn’t rub two romantic sentences together if you tried,” snapped Hermione, “is no reason to jump over Harry.”

"I can too rub... two... sentence thingies..." Ron sputtered. "Together!" Hermione just shook her head.

"P-lease..." she said with the faintest hint of a smile. Hermione gathered her things and tried to smooth out her bushy hair. "Well," she gave Harry and Gabriella hugs, "now that everyone can apparate we can visit each other more often."

"I think I'll stick to flying," said Harry weakly. He really had no enjoyment at all over apparating from one place to another, but seeing as it was the one bit of magic he could do outside Hogwarts until his seventeenth birthday, he figured he'd have a bit of fun with Uncle Vernon over the summer.

"You will stop by before we're off on our voyage?" asked Gabriella. "After that, Harry will be staying with Sirius."

"I can't wait until we get him out of Privet Drive, once and for all," said Ron emphatically. Gabriella pinched his arm hard. "Ayy! Okay... okay... number four, Privet Drive!"

Sirius had asked if Harry would come and stay with him over the summer, not at Grimmauld Place, but at a small castle owned by the Blacks in Greece overlooking the sea. Harry told him of his promise to Dumbledore to stay with the Dursleys, but that he and Gabriella would most definitely stop by during their summer trip to the Mediterranean.

As the friends exited the train, Harry watched Ron and Hermione walking hand in hand to greet Hermione's parents. They hugged Hermione and then they hugged Ron. Harry had to laugh seeing Ron shrink away from the wet kiss Mrs. Granger planted firmly on the redhead's cheek. He saw Mr. and Mrs. Chang greet James and Cho and, much to Harry's delight, Patrick O'Riley who would be spending much of the summer with them as opposed to the orphanage where he had spent the year before coming to Hogwarts. Patrick was showing Mr. Chang the Magpies Snitch and pointed over at Harry. Mr. Chang rose up from the small child and looked over into Harry's eyes. There was a tremendous warmth there, and Mr. Chang bowed

slightly toward Harry who nodded his own head back and gave a little wave and a gracious smile.

Suddenly, there was a little squeal, and Harry looked over to see Ginny run and jump into her father's arms. It was interesting to see Mr. Weasley in fine clothes and flanked by two high-ranking Aurors. With the defeat of Voldemort, he had been resoundingly elected to the position of Minister, and had finally stopped telling everyone that, "It's only temporary."

Ginny hopped out of Mr. Weasley's arms and into her mother's. The embrace was followed by Ron and Hermione's. For a moment, Harry's eyes locked with Molly Weasley's, and without thinking he reached into his pocket and fingered a folded and worn sheet of parchment. With Gabriella at his side, he walked over and shook Mr. Weasley's hand. There was a blinding flash of light. Harry blinked to find Colin Creevey and his camera.

"History, Harry!" said Colin, beaming. "History! It'll be the cover photo on tomorrow's Prophet for sure." And he disappeared into the crowd. Harry turned to see that Mr. Weasley's ears had reddened a bit, more from embarrassment than irritation, and Harry was glad to see there was still a sense of humility about the newly elected Minister.

"You're looking well, Harry," said Mr. Weasley brightly. "Gabriella, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"The pleasure is mine, sir," said Gabriella warmly.

"I do hope," Mr. Weasley said, "we'll be seeing the two of you at the Burrow this summer."

"There's no hope about it Arthur," jumped in Mrs. Weasley. "They'll come for a visit as often as they like and at least once a week."

"I don't think..." began Harry, but Molly Weasley had him about the neck with her arms before he had a chance to say another word. She kissed his cheek.

“I know you’re supposed to stay at that dreary place in Little Whinging, and that you’re planning to stay with Sirius,” she said, “but you must always know where home is, Harry.” She squeezed him in her arms and Harry felt a tremendous surge of warmth pass through him. “Arthur has made the arrangements,” she whispered in his ear. “The Darbinyans are connected to the network now.”

“Gabriella!” a voice called from just passed the entrance to the platform. Hearing her voice, shivers ran down Harry’s spine. He hadn’t seen or heard her since Christmas, and so much had happened... so much had happened. Hesitating, Harry turned to see Soseh Darbinyan standing near the platform wall. She was dressed in neat black robes that had flashes of deep purple at the sleeves. She wore no hat and her hair which had grayed and grown since last they met was pulled back into ponytail. At her side was Remus Lupin, also wearing black robes. Having already greeted a number of students, he was smiling brightly and looked healthier than Harry had ever seen him, even though the full moon was just the night before.

Hearing her mother’s voice, Gabriella gave off a little squeal of her own and ran over towards Soseh. Harry, however, stood frozen, not really sure what to do. There was a sharp pain at his side.

“Ayy!” called Harry, turning to find Cho Chang, her fingers pinching a fold of skin on his right side.

“What are you waiting for, Harry?” she asked pointedly.

“I killed her husband,” Harry said quietly.

“You didn’t kill anybody,” said Mrs. Weasley sharply.

“You returned her son,” added Cho. “If anyone understands, it’s Soseh.”

“Cho’s right, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley, as she gently pushed him forward. “Go.”

But Harry’s feet wouldn’t move. He saw Gabriella hug her mother and he watched as the tears began to flow down both women’s cheeks.

Offering comfort, Remus had his arm about Soseh, and Harry thought his own arms should be about Gabriella, but he couldn't move. Then Cho gave Harry a quick kiss on the neck, grabbed him about his arm and pulled his frozen body forward.

"Come on," she coaxed softly.

Wizards, witches and their children continued to welcome and hug each other as the platform burgeoned with traffic. Harry could hear people call his name, and out of the corner of his eyes he saw fingers pointing in his direction, but the scenery and the noises blurred into oblivion leaving only a swirl of colors about a tunnel that led toward Soseh Darbinyan. It was almost like preparing the vision for apparating, only it was Cho pulling him forward.

They were about five steps from the Darbinyan women when Soseh pulled away from Gabriella, reached up to wipe a tear from her daughter's face, and noticed Cho and Harry walking toward her. Soseh's face bore no smile, but presented a warm expression of compassion, and her eyes carried a look of deep understanding that went well beyond Harry's comprehension. Harry's fears of seeing anger or resentment were washed away, but he found himself unable to hold her gaze; his own eyes were filled with too much sorrow.

"Mrs. Darbinyan!" said Cho brightly. "It's so wonderful to finally meet you at last. Harry insisted that I come say hello. This was my last year at Hogwarts."

"Mama," said Gabriella, "you remember about Cho?"

"The other woman," said Soseh, and a curl of a smile came across her lips. "Gabriella has told me many good things. You will visit us this summer, no?"

"That sounds wonderful!" answered Cho. "Doesn't it Harry... Harry?"

"What?" Harry asked, breaking himself out of his trance. "Yeah, that sounds great!" he said, mustering a bit more of an engaging voice.

"I can't wait for you to come over," said Gabriella, giving Cho a hug. "I want you to meet my brother."

"I'd like that," said Cho. There was a moment's pause and she added, "I'd better get going. James, Patrick, and my folks are waiting for me outside, and I'm sure those two boys are going to get into trouble if I don't show up soon. Soseh, it was great to see you. Take care." She gave Soseh a hug, and then squeezed Harry's arm. "See you later, hero." Cho's hand brushed his face, and she disappeared into a sea of people.

"A busy year, eh Harry?" said Remus. "Still, none the worse for the wear." He patted Harry on the back. "Is it true what Sirius says, you've given up wanting to be an Auror? No one at Hogwarts has said a word."

"I don't know," answered Harry, shrugging his shoulders. "I think, maybe, my path leads to another calling." For the first time, Soseh's face truly brightened and a wide smile showed her golden tooth. She held out her arm and pulled Harry close.

Harry wasn't sure why, but he began to cry. It had been just four weeks since Grigor had given up his life for Antreas, and though Mr. Darbinyan's original plan was to take Harry's life, the Gryffindor's heart was saddened knowing he was gone, knowing that Soseh's husband was gone, and knowing that Gabriella's father was gone.

When Harry pulled slightly back and looked down through wet eyes into Soseh's face, she brought her thumbs to his cheeks and wiped away his tears.

"There will be many more of these I'm afraid," she said warmly. "Come, let us go home. There is much to eat, much to talk about." Harry looked up at Remus, and wondered why he was smiling.

"The Ministry has seen fit to provide a car," said Remus. "Someone there must like you." He winked. "And... it looks like I'll be your escort for awhile, Harry. I hope you don't mind."

"Kind of a light guard," said Harry somewhat surprised that with the upcoming battle he wouldn't have more watchers. "I guess the Ministry doesn't know then." He looked over to thank Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, but they had already left. In fact, the platform was thinning out, though there were still a few gawkers whispering and staring at Harry.

"The Ministry doesn't know what, Harry?" asked Remus.

"Come," interrupted Soseh, "such things are trivial. It is time we left."

Harry and Gabriella said goodbye to a few more of their friends and were soon on their way back to Privet Drive in the back of a large black limousine. Remus helped keep the conversation light by talking about Sirius and how he was enjoying freedom.

"You should have seen him strutting down Diagon Alley," said Remus brightly. "The Dailey Prophet may have declared him a hero, but not one wizard would come within ten feet of him. He deliberately walked wherever there were large groups of people just to see how long it would take before they scattered."

Harry was surprised to see Remus so animated the morning after a full moon. Still, he was glad that the werewolf was so energetic. Harry was, for the most part, happy to keep quiet for fear of saying the wrong thing. But when Remus burst out laughing after hearing one of Gabriella's stories, Harry couldn't help himself.

"I don't get it, Remus," Harry said. "It was a full moon last night. How is it possible that you can..."

"Soseh," said Remus with a grand smile. The part time professor put his arm around Gabriella's mother and gave her a warm hug, a hug that elicited a slight blush in Soseh's cheeks. "She's a genius! When I saw what she'd done for Fred, I... well, it's beyond magic, Harry. I've asked her to..."

"And I've told you no, Remus," said Soseh flatly. "It is not meant for everyone, for in the wrong hands it could be turned to nefarious ends."

"I don't understand," said Harry. Gabriella took his hand.

"The same potion that keeps a werewolf from turning on the full moon," she said, "has the opposite effect on non-werewolves. Ordinary people could be drugged and turned into entire legions of werewolves."

"Pravus used the potion to wage war in the Carpathian Mountains, and there are still people being bitten their to this day." When Soseh looked at Harry, her gaze was deep and penetrating, and he couldn't hold their stare. He squirmed in his seat and instead chose to look out the window. "You wanted to know something, Harry. Best to ask and be done with it."

Finally, he turned and looked at her.

"You're feeling better, then?" he asked cautiously. "You seem... better. Gabriella says you're better, but..."

"It was Grigor, Harry," she said softly with nothing but kindness in her eyes.

"Something like an Imperius Curse," added Gabriella. It was the first she'd spoken of it, and there was sorrow in her words. This time it was she who looked blankly out the window.

"Yes," said Soseh, with a bit of a quake in her voice that mirrored the emotions of her daughter, "Grigor and I reached an impasse I am afraid. It is unfortunate that he chose to control me so. There are not too many wizards that could, but I've always had a soft spot for dark-haired men." She grinned, ruffling Harry's hair with her hand, and then her expression grew more serious. "That's why I had to be quick, Harry, and I'm sorry that it put you in such a dreadful position. I can see many things, but I never dreamed...."

Soseh let out a large sigh and shook her head. Remus handed her a handkerchief and she daubed her wet eyes. There was a long moment of silence as the car turned into Privet Drive and pulled in front of number four.

"It was the will of Asha," Soseh whispered through her emotions. She turned in her black leather chair to look more fully at Harry and fought back the tears.

"We came to Little Whinging because Anaxarete came to Little Whinging," she said, defiance building in her voice. "We took that house," she pointed out the window at number five, "not because there was a wizard across the street, but because it was the only one we could find that would hold Grigor's instruments. The morning we moved in and you nearly fell out the window, I knew the secret you kept. I could see what needed to be done. Grigor would use the first Muggle he found to protect Gabriella; he would use you. But you were a wizard, and such a spell would be fatal, so you needed to be shielded from his control." Harry reached down and touched his right arm.

"Then why not just tell Grigor what I was?" asked Harry.

"Before we came to Britain, I had a vision of Grigor and a bound wizard before the Curtain of Phenolem. Was it simply Grigor's thoughts, or a window into what was to come? I still do not know. All I could do was to try and protect you from being taken to the Ministry," answered Soseh. "I failed." Her shoulders slumped, and again Remus' handkerchief made its way to her eyes.

"Harry," said Remus quietly, "I'm going to take your things to your house. Soseh wanted to discuss a few items with you in private across the street. I'll wait with your aunt and uncle until you come on over."

"Do you think that's such a good idea?" asked Harry. Remus smiled a toothy grin.

"Yes," he said. "Yes I do."

As Harry, Gabriella and Soseh walked toward the Darbinyan door, Antreas opened it and stepped out. Gabriella dropped her trunk and ran into his arms. Soseh was right; there was no loss for tears this evening. Eventually, they all made their way into the living room. The

air was filled with the wonderful aroma of a simmering stew, and fresh baked bread. Harry's stomach turned; it had been far too long since his last real meal, but first he needed to say something.

"Soseh, I'm so sorry," he said softly, as Gabriella closed the front door.

"Sorry for what, Harry?" she asked.

"For Grigor... for not realizing his plans sooner, for not seeing that he had you under his control."

Soseh sighed and shook her head. She walked over to Harry, took his hand and sat with him on the couch.

"Harry, the road we travel is paved with many stones. If we step upon one that is crooked we might twist an ankle, if another is too high we might trip. The stones have been laid for centuries, and many have walked the same road. The only thing that distinguishes one traveler from another is the choice they make as they reach each fork in the road. And if one knows well the heart of the traveler, the destination is almost certain."

"When I saw you hanging from your window across the street with owls fluttering about your room, I knew you were a wizard, and when I saw you dawdling on the sidewalk outside your garden, I knew you had eyes for Gabriella. Try as I might to turn Grigor back onto the proper path, he refused, and when I discovered Gabriella also had feelings for you I knew you were at risk."

As Soseh motioned for Antreas and Gabriella to sit, Harry noticed a faint mark on Antreas' right arm. It looked like...

"Harry," began Soseh again, this time her voice clear and strong, the matriarch of her family, "first, I want to thank you for bringing me my son. It appears that Grigor has left our child skills he never had before, skills the Ministry and Albus Dumbledore have offered to help develop and understand." She folded her hands in her lap and looked closely at Harry. "It would have torn me apart if Grigor had succeeded and taken your life. One evil can never turn another into good. I would

have both my husband and son, but not completely, not wholly. Their souls would have been forfeit. That Gabriella was there to seal the bond, to keep it in the family, is as it should be.”

Soseh’s eyes demanded Harry’s attention, but it was being drawn toward Antreas’ forearm. She noticed Harry’s wandering eyes and smiled.

“Second,” she continued, “it is time you understood the mark on your arm. It was not Grigor’s spell or my protection charm that put it there.” She chuckled to herself. “It was perhaps the most foolish, and the most wonderful thing I have ever done. There was little time to know for sure, but when I saw how you were embarrassed to be seen by Gabriella, and how you cleaned yourself to become presentable, I sensed the goodness in your heart. It was not enough to truly welcome you to the family, but I didn’t know how long I would have.” She turned to her son. “Antreas, show him.”

Antreas leaned toward Harry and held out his right forearm.

“My father bore a similar mark,” he said, “but each man’s is weaved to suit the bearer. I was never allowed to carry the burden until... until you saved me.”

On his forearm was a thin pale outline of some sort. Harry leaned in closer to make it out. At first he couldn’t pull it together and then, suddenly, the coloration and detail came to view. It was clearly the outline of a dragon -- a Hungarian...

“... Horntail?” Harry whispered.

“Yes, Harry, a dragon; her name is Asha,” said Gabriella. “Centuries ago, a family of Hungarian Horntails flew across the Black Sea and established their home near the village of my ancestors in the South Caucasus at the base of Mount Aragats. She lived just outside the village and, defying conventional wisdom, had come to understand my ancestors as they too came to understand her and her family. It is said that during a rise of darkness she was attacked by evil, and one of my ancestors lost her life in defending the dragon and her family. After the darkness was beaten back, Asha and her kin took it upon

themselves to protect all in our line as long as we were dedicated to use her power for the betterment of all God's creatures." Gabriella knelt beside Harry and reached into the pocket where she knew he held the stone of cinnabar; she pulled it out and held it in the palm of her hand.

"When she died, this is what remained -- her heart, the Heart of Asha."

"The blessing," continued Soseh, "is inscribed on the males of each generation by the women of the generation before. It will be Gabriella's duty to pass the blessing to your sons."

"But... I mean, we never really..."

"That is to say the sons of Harry Potter," said Soseh grinning, "whoever their mother may be." Both Harry and Gabriella were blushing bright red. "The bond is sealed when one shows a dragon kindness. Little did I know that the kindness had already been shown even before I set the mark."

Harry looked confused.

"Hagrid's dragon," said Gabriella. "At risk to yourself, you protected it from harm and saw it to safety." Harry cast Gabriella a questioning look. "Ron told me," she answered his eyes and shrugging her shoulders.

"But this," said Harry, "this isn't a dragon, it's..."

"Are you so sure, Harry?" interrupted Soseh knowingly. "Look closely."

Harry looked down at his arm, and watched in amazement as the symbols of the four houses seemed to transform in front of his eyes. The snake of Slytherin appeared more dragon-like, the wings of Ravenclaw grew bat-like and joined the dragon's back, the sword of Gryffindor flared from the dragon's mouth in a great burst of flame, while the vines of Hufflepuff became the outline of the dragon's legs

ending in claws with sharp pointed talons. Clasped in the talons, the dragon held two crossed lightning bolts -- the Viswa Vajra.

"It is a symbol to be proud of Harry, but not one to share, for it marks you as the keeper of a great power... more than just the heart of the dragon."

"Isn't this power enough?" asked Harry, taking the red orb from Gabriella's hand and holding it in his own.

"Asha did not only leave us her heart, Harry," said Soseh slowly and carefully. "So too has she left us her progeny, generations of dragons, hundred around the world, that are sworn to uphold the oath of protection. Such is the blessing, Harry. Such is the burden."

Soseh took to her feet and smoothed down the wrinkles in her robes. She then reached out and took Harry by the hands and lifted him up in front of her. Her eyes were bright, and penetrating.

"Let me walk you across the street and once you have settled your affairs you and your family can join us for dinner." Antreas and Gabriella both stood and Gabriella kissed him on the cheek.

"I know it's a bit much, Harry, but there'll be loads of time to figure it all out. And there's something that can help you find your way." Harry found his thoughts spinning as Gabriella reached around her neck and pulled off the chain holding the Gryffindor signet that Professor McGonagall had given Harry. She placed it around his neck and held her hand over the lion baring two ruby red eyes, pressing it gently against his heart. "For times of darkness," she whispered, and this time kissed him on the lips and smiled warmly. She joined her brother in the kitchen as Harry and Soseh left the house and started across the street.

"Not so much time, is there Harry?" said Soseh looking skyward as the stars began to sprinkle the heavens. "Ebyrth returns and you have been chosen by the Centaurs."

Harry just looked at her in amazement. He had meant to tell his friends of the coming battle, but hadn't been able to bring himself to.

As far as he knew, only Dumbledore was aware that he had been chosen by the Centaurs.

“How did you...”

“It is an easy thing to wield power, to bend armies to one’s bidding against a rising storm. It is another thing altogether to use such power wisely to serve the betterment of earth.” They climbed the Dursley’s front steps. “The power is now your burden, Harry. When the dark cloud returns, use it wisely.” At the door she kissed him on the cheek and started across the street toward home. Turning back over her shoulder she called out jovially, “Bring your family when you’re ready. I’ve made plenty!”

Harry watched as she disappeared into number five, and his stomach growled. The last thing he was going to do was bring Vernon and Petunia over across the street for dinner. Poor Remus was probably going mad already.

He opened the door and saw the back of a wizard’s head sitting at a chair in the living room; Vernon and Petunia were seated next to each other in the couch on the far side. Their faces were alabaster white, and for the first time in Harry’s memory they looked grateful to see Harry breach the door.

“Ah, Harry!” said Vernon with a twisted attempt at a smile. “Such a pleasure as always.”

As Harry stepped into the living room, he noticed Remus drinking a glass of water in the kitchen. He was smiling broadly.

“Remus?” asked Harry. The wizard in the living room turned; it was Sirius. He too was wearing a broad smile and he stood to greet Harry.

“My, my,” he exclaimed, “not even a month and you’ve grown two inches!” Harry ran to him at once and held him in his arms. Sirius squeezed tight, and then ruffled Harry’s hair. “Remus has invited me to dinner at the Darbinyans. Is that okay with you?”

"It's brilliant!" said Harry, instantly. Vernon and Petunia were trying to make themselves disappear into the very fabric of the couch.

"Did Remus tell you?" asked Sirius. Harry shook his head. "He's moved in next door; at least for a while, maybe longer." Sirius winked at Remus. "Soseh's been giving him potions to help him from turning into a werewolf." Sirius looked at Vernon as if the Muggle cared. "They're almost working!"

"I thought..." Harry began, but he was cut short by the screech of an owl flying in through the open front window. It quickly dropped one of the many scrolls it was carrying and flew back out the window into the starry night. Harry unrolled the scroll and read it aloud.

Notice to recipient,

At 0130, the 26th of December 1997, a Muggle of your acquaintance witnessed your magical spell. You failed to note the name of the Muggle in question, and send it to the Ministry within three days of receipt of the original notice. You are to report to the Ministry on the 2nd of July for a hearing on your potential fine and imprisonment.

Cedil Perkins

Director, Muggle Relations Office

"Imprisonment!" cried Harry, crumpling the parchment in his hands.

"Wonderful!" said Sirius. "I can tell you about all the special things you can do while you're at Azkaban." He began to walk Harry to the front door. "Coming Remus?" he called back. Remus simply rolled his eyes, and joined the pair across the street.

The meal in the Darbinyan home was fantastic, and Harry couldn't help but notice how the two members of his "family" were as healthy as he had ever seen them. He was also surprised to find out that it was true, Remus was staying at the Darbinyans, ostensibly under Dumbledore's orders to watch the young wizard across the street, yet Harry couldn't help but notice that there was a bit of spark between

Remus and Soseh. Whatever Antreas thought, he didn't show it. He was very much like his father in that way.

During the meal they made plans for the summer. While not joining the youth enrichment program directly, Remus and Soseh would be close at hand should the need arise, and they would be joining them at Sirius' before they all headed to Armenia.

"Greece," said Gabriella dreamily, "I'll love Greece. Tell us about your house, Sirius."

"Well," Sirius began shyly, "it's not so much a house really. The Blacks... well, I own an estate outside the Pantheon. Some call it a castle." Sirius became quite uncomfortable talking about his wealth, and he turned the conversation by telling a joke about his initial introduction with the Dursleys, and everyone began to laugh.

It was a joy that had long been missing from the Darbinyan home, a happiness that filled the empty corners and spilled out through the windows onto the garden and into the street. Harry could see Soseh breathe in the warmth and the energy. Ideas of dragons and Ebyrth, thoughts of Centaurs and Dementors, visions of Voldemort and the gnawing questions that still pulled at Harry's soul slipped effortlessly into nothingness. They would wait for another time. Soseh was pouring everyone espresso when Gabriella took Harry by the hand.

"Mama? Perhaps Harry could walk with me through the neighborhood this evening?" she asked. "I'd like to see if Duncan's home." She put a half spoonful of sugar in Harry's empty demitasse and then handed it to her mother.

"I think it's a marvelous idea, darling." Soseh filled the cup with espresso and handed it to Harry. "Here you go my child. I'd say it will put hair on your chest, but I see that there are two already growing!" Again the whole house erupted in laughter, as Harry's ears reddened.

"Are you up for a walk, Harry?" asked Gabriella.

"Don't be silly," he said with a smile.

Within ten minutes, he and a very beautiful young woman were walking down the street toward Duncan's house, talking about anything but the Wizarding world.

Chapter 74 - Epilogue

-X-X-X-

The day had been long, the evening longer, and Harry's mind was filled with an explosion of possibilities and futures. He waved at her from his window, blew her a kiss, walked blearily backward falling fully onto his bed, and he pondered the possibility of children. She would be a wonderful mother, he thought as his eyes closed and a smile curled on his lips. Quickly, his mind faded into sleep.

Save for the lake, the pair were surrounded by the tall trees. The air was suddenly quite cold and all sound was muffled into an eerie silence. Harry watched as Draco plunged naked into the water. Dumbledore's voice echoed in his mind. "If not, his clothes would wash away, a sign to Centaurs that such things as robes are unclean."

Harry watched as the stones about the great pool grew skyward. They encircled him in a great gray tomb. He held out his lit wand, but its light was feeble against the darkness. There was a stench of death here, and as Harry tried to stumble forward climbing over the rubble he saw a rat scurry across a pile of dust and debris. Harry kicked it with his foot; the dust flew into the air revealing beneath a set of robes -- black wizard's robes.

Suddenly Dumbledore's voice began to laugh. It was coming from every direction and Harry turned to see Gargoyle head after Gargoyle head, broken on the ground around him, each roaring with laughter and gleaming at him with bright blue eyes.

In the early morning hours, Harry woke to the darkness of his room on Privet Drive and quickly flipped on the lamp at his bedside. He was cold, and yet sweat dripped down the side of his face. His heart was racing, and like a small child who might reach for a blanket, he grabbed a well-worn piece of folded parchment and opened it beneath the lamp's light reading it for the hundredth time.

My dear Harry,

Would that I could reset the hands of time and set the world right, but alas my magic is no match for the fate that stands before each of us. It is clear to all that the path you've been forced to travel has been cruel and unkind. And still, with all the adversities you have faced, with all the battles you have fought, you have found time to smile, to care, to love. Could there be someone else in all the world with more loyalty, with more bravery, with more compassion?

We are all forever in your debt. You faced death but did not strike, and in so doing brought light to darkness, life to death. It is by your example we still have hope that, one day, we will win this war against hatred.

With all the love a mother can give her children,

-M-

Harry took a deep breath, carefully folded the parchment, and set it at his bedside. His racing heart slowed, his body warmed, and he turned off the lamp at his bedside and closed his eyes. A smile curled on his lips, and soon he was fast asleep.

Just outside of Glasgow, the Chang family finished saying their goodnights. It had been a busy day and although everyone was exhausted the children still wanted to stay awake and share yet more stories of the year's events. Finally, Mr. Chang put his foot down. If he hadn't, Patrick and James would never be off to bed. As it was, he had to tell them to go to sleep at least three times before the two friends finally settled down.

In the quiet darkness of the night, still unable to sleep, it was Patrick that heard the scuttle across the wooden floor in James' room. Ignoring it, he forced his eyes to remain closed just as a loud thump hit the floor. He whispered for James, but the young Chang was already in a deep sleep. Again, Patrick could hear a skittering and this time a rolling along the floor. Risking a bit of magic he lit his wand.

There on the floor beside his bedroll was a rat with colorless fur pushing the black Snitch of the Magpies that Hermione had given him to keep watch over. He reached down and grabbed the Snitch just as the rat bit his finger. A drip of blood rolled onto the black orb, and

suddenly the white signatures across its surface began to erupt in a brilliant light that sent focused beams onto the walls displaying the player's names. The Snitch began to expand and crack. Patrick held the black ball up for a closer look as a dark, sooty smoke began to issue forth through the growing slits of names. Patrick felt very cold as he watched with wonder the smoke curl upward toward the ceiling. Suddenly, the glowing orb flickered and went out; the darkness had returned.

Chapter 75 - Author's Notes

o--o

Thanks for reading this attempt at fan-fiction. Again, it was written to illicit discussion with my son. Its moral threads are obvious, but hopefully the story was interesting.

Yes, it begs for a sequel. Such is the nature of a HP Book 6... there has to be a Book 7. I'm just not sure that it makes sense to carry this story on, and run against the current canon. Should I instead start a new story based on the facts in Half Blood Prince? Maybe both?

I hope to hear your thoughts and suggestions on this very subject.

It is August 2005, and my plan now is to spend a little time to correct the many errors in this story and to update the website with the background information that provides more insight into the story's creation. Sort of a mini-lexicon. Check in late September, if you can remember.

Then we'll see where my muse takes me.

Again, thanks so much for taking the time to read. Now, take the time to write a review! I welcome your advice and suggestions. God Bless!

Chapter 1 - A New Beginning

Pravus

The evil wizard, "Pravus", was not created until he was described by Dobby when he was with Remus and Harry in the "Maurader's Eye". Pravus is Latin for depraved, wicked, evil, perverse. Although not described, the timeline for Pravus falls during the late crusades in and around the 11th century. Dobby says that "Those who followed the ways of Pravus were killed in the Great Purge, the same time the Great Wizard Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald." Here the ways of Pravus refer to a Dark Magic born from the 'near' east. Geographically, this is important because it points to the roots of the Darbinyan family (below).

Dudley Reborn

Perhaps one of the most controversial characters I incorporated into the story was Dudley and his new found "niceness". The reason is explained later as being caused by his brush with a Dementor and seeing himself for what he truly was for the first time. I liken it to a re-birth of sorts that few of us are allowed to experience. "Re-birth" or "second-chance" is a theme in many instances in this story. A few of the critics to date have complained about two unlikely transformations: Dudley and Draco. I'm hoping that JKR will see fit to redeem Draco; I doubt she'll do anything about Dudley. Alas.

Ron/Hermione

The attempt to hide their activities with "The Order" are, in this instance, just a feint to hide their activities with each other as a couple. These letters cover up Ron's joining Hermione's family in Germany for vacation.

The Darbinyans

"Movers were opening up the large truck and talking to a rather tall, dark haired man, whose eyes kept darting up and down the street. The morning was warm, but he wore a long-sleeved shirt,...."

The reader might think that Grigor was looking for Gabriella, but he wasn't; he was looking for Anaxarete (Emma). The long sleeved shirt was not to cover the dark mark of a Death Eater, but because he wore the White Mark of Asha on his arm, as Harry himself now wears.

The race of the Darbinyans came after quite a few cycles. First came my selection of the hotspot of the 1990's -- Lebanon. There are a number of different peoples in Lebanon, and Armenians are not uncommon. The idea of linking into what I'd call a more "magical" area was intriguing and I went with Armenian. The name Darbinyan is not an uncommon Armenian name, and can be found many times with a Google search.

"Without ever letting go of Harry's arm, this small woman Soseh with surprisingly great strength was marching him Harry to her front door." This is the point where Soseh (a seer) places the protection charm on Harry.

It was important when Harry was introduced to ensure ambiguity of Harry being a Dursley or a Potter. Soseh already knows he's a wizard (though not a Potter), Gabriella suspects, Grigor is clueless.

The University of Balamand in Tripoli is a real place in Lebanon. Yes, there is a Tripoli Lebanon, and you can look up the school's web-site to see what they teach.

The coffee is espresso, and the scene harkens back to when I was a teenager and a Romanian friend of mine made me some in his studio apartment. After I grimaced, "Perhaps some sugar." were his very words.

Chapter 2 - Hogwarts Forgotten

General

Hermione's voice. "Harry, you're worse than Ron."

Is a Hermione quote taken from OOP.

"Asha!" she exclaimed, an accent slipping into her words. "Your cousin is a fool."

Our first introduction to the famous dragon.

Geography

"On a good night, by the shores of the Mediterranean, you can watch the sun plunge into the sea flashing a million colours."

Tripoli, Lebanon is on the Mediterranean.

Mars

"Uh, yes. Yes, they do." He pointed to a bright red star directly over his head. "There, that's Mars."

"It's the brightest it's been for fifteen years," she whispered. Then pointing to another portion of the sky, "And there?"

Firenze spoke of Mars in OOP, and I thought it'd play a larger role in HBP, but it didn't. In this story Mars is a thread throughout (a symbol of Voldemort's rise), ultimately giving way to the coming of Ebyrth.

Venus

"Venus is the, uh, the uhm...." and before he could finish they had kissed their first kiss.

For those that don't know, Venus is the goddess of love.

Grigor

Grigor seemed never to be home. Tonight, he looked intently at Harry for some time, until Harry waved his hand, and Grigor waved back, turned, and went into the house.

At this point in the writing, it wasn't clear if Grigor was a DE, a foreign agent for Dumbledore, or something else. I knew I wanted him to be dark and mysterious. Soon Gabriella had a brother, and I knew Grigor was there to find the murderer. It took some time to pick the killer.

"Well," he thought smiling to himself, "perhaps I am a bit of a criminal."

I was going to go with the 'bad-boy' Harry here, and have that be an attraction for Gab, who has a dark streak herself. Bad-boy Harry never materialized more than long hair, drinking, and an earring.

Hints

"A journal, or perhaps a diary, and she appeared to be having trouble with her pen. A candle flickering on a stand near by was the only light in the room."

Every good witch prefers candlelight, and the reason she's having trouble with the pen is because she's only ever used a quill.

When Gabriella enters his room she notes that he's had a special pet (Hedwig) for six years, that he writes with a quill, that another owl enters, and Hogwarts a History is sitting near his door. At this point she pretty much knows what Harry is, not who.

Chapter 3 - Shattered Glass

The chapter introduces 'bigotry' outside of the Dursleys, and places it in a much more open context. Is it racist to single out someone because of the colour of their skin to search their bag?

"Papa's timing has never been that great; of all the times to move to England."

I took a lot of heat (I do love reviews) because the racism displayed was very American, and not at all British, certainly if placed into a 1996 context. A quick search of Times editorials and activities in the Middle East and Lebanon in 1996 as well as my own aged perspective would suggest that Britain was not exactly warm and fuzzy with the Lebanese. While the scene at the pool where Gabriella has her bag searched is much more “2005”, I don’t think it’s beyond the realm of possibility for a pool in Britain in 1996.

Emma & Duncan

“Around the bicep of his large right arm was a tattoo of thorns that matched, somewhat, the earring on his left ear.”

The thorns are a symbol of bondage, and represent Emma’s hold over Duncan. We see that Emma has “piercing green eyes”. This is mentioned again on the train, just before she blows it up.

The Pool

Water plays, obviously, a tremendous role in this story: a symbol of cleansing, and baptism.

Malcolm Smelt

“...it wasn’t dripping to the ground; instead, it started to spread like some slowly creeping vine.” Mint ice cream is my son’s favorite.

Liquor

Sprinkled throughout are stories that are meant to illicit discussion. Was it okay for Harry to take a sip from Duncan’s flask, it was only a little sip anyway?

Earring

Tonks is the girl that pierces Harry’s ear. One has to wonder what she thought when he walked into the store she was using as a cover to watch him from.

End

I thought about writing a booklet of vignettes that describe each of the... er, more intimate moments. But I think you have your own memories of what can be done in a parked car, and, if you don't, I bet you will one day. ;)

Chapter 4 Tears in the Sunset

Harry's Hair

An effort to make him into a "bad-boy" that didn't really get to where I wanted it to go. Oddly, Harry's hair grows overnight and nobody seems to notice. What surprises me is that none of the readers (you) seemed overly bothered by this. Thank you.

The Molamar

Obviously based on a mole, the "mar" extension was intended to give it an oceanic ability which never came to pass. It was my intention that the creature be essentially forgotten and later return helping to save the day at the climax. Trying to find a reasonable way to fit that in was hard.

Hints... foreshadowing:

"Today you're going to die... Tom," he whispered. There was the slightest pang in his forehead. The phone rang, and Harry ran downstairs to answer it; it was Emma.

- The pang was caused by Emma, not his thought of Tom.

And Duncan saying: Ask Em! She's special too. Eh, Em? Well, Em knows. We're bound by thorns, did yeh know that Harry?

Hermione and Ron

"OUR last letter?" Harry repeated to himself out loud. "So you two were off with the Order, weren't you?"

I thought readers would clearly see what Harry could not - Ron and Hermione were getting it on together, and that Harry was just blind to that fact. Reviews, however, were scathing as the readers were upset that Ron and Hermione had excluded Harry, and that they would never do that. The two were off snogging in Germany, and Harry and you (?) thought they were off with the Order. Do you think they would have said?

Chapter 5 - The Test

Well this was hard since I'm not from Britain. I had a lot of advice, and I tried to fit the real rules in as best as I could (and hope that we account for the rest with magic).

The tire slashing scene introduces a bunch more Muggles. I suppose if I had to edit the story these chapters would go, but I wanted to show that there's good in all of us. I wanted that to feed Harry's determination to set things straight at Hogwarts and the Wizarding world.

Mrs. Figg

"Idiot, boy, for all you know they could be working for him."

Well, originally Grigor was to be like Snape - a double agent, but then that's not very original is it? I mean, he'd be like Snape. Instead he's a sort of Van Helsing, chasing the witch that has subsumed his son.

Chapter 6 Dudley's Confession

So this Chapter helps explain Dudley's conversion to 'goodness'. I've seen a lot of fics that discuss what happens to Dudley after his encounter with the Dementors. I equated it to being sent away to four years of military school compressed into about ten seconds.

Chapter 7 - Eyes of the Dragon

By Harry's birthday, Gabriella is well aware that he's got special abilities. Seeing Fred and George appear and then suddenly disappear after walking out the front door, she's sure he's not only a wizard but has wizard friends. Of course, Harry doesn't know this.

"Out of bravery, fire. Out of wisdom, blood. Out of love, true power."

Was originally written as

"Out of bravery, fire. Out of love, blood. Out of wisdom, sight."

At first, I envisioned the stone would give Harry the power to see anywhere in the world like some type of crystal ball... perhaps commune with the dead. But then it came time to present another theme... sometimes what we think we're going to do with our lives is not what happens. Harry wants to be an Auror, but instead he will become a healer, the stone amplifying this special ability. It is Hermione who will become the Auror. And Ron, well... we'll see.

Gabriella: "If you are the one, the heart of the dragon will be yours." This was originally the Eye of Asha, but then there was the Marauder's Eye, and two eyes are just too much for any story. Heart fits better anyway; don't you think?